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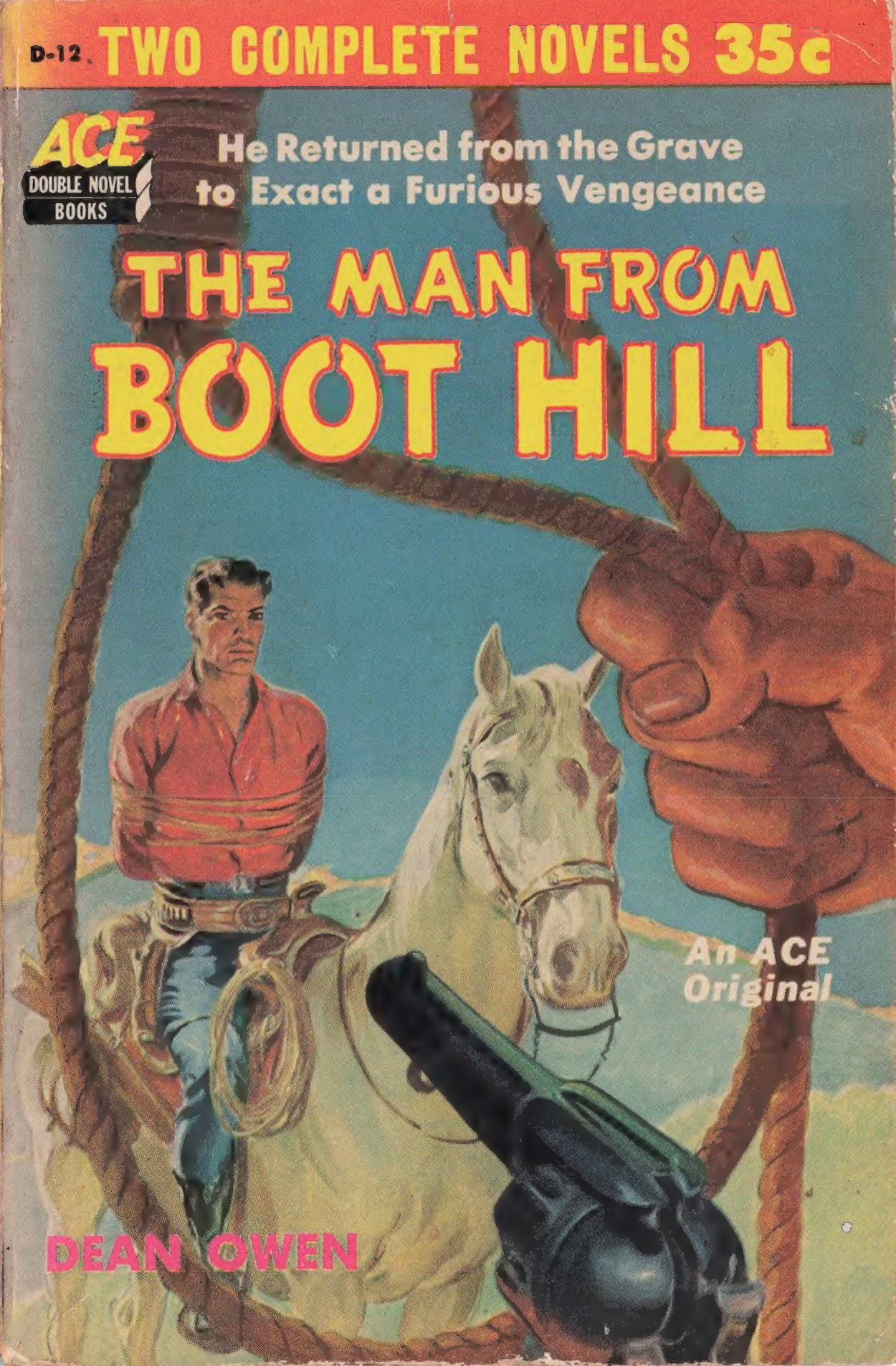
ACE DOUBLE NOVEL BOOKS

He Returned from the Grave to Exact a Furious Vengeance

THE MAN FROM BOOT HILL



An ACE Original

DEAN OWEN

ALL THEY HAD LEFT HIM WERE SIX COFFIN HANDLES

Though his memory was still cursed in the town that had strung him up and nailed him into his coffin, Reck Corstain had an unfinished mission which had to be completed before he could find peace.

So under the cloak of night, slipping silently through deserted roads and dark cowtown alleys, Reck came back, a loaded six-shooter in his hand and a dead man's heart in his chest that beat only for vengeance. THE MAN FROM BOOT HILL is a superior Western thriller that will hold you breathless to its smashing climax.

Turn this book over for second complete novel.

Cast of Characters

RECK CORSTAIN: A lynch rope behind him, he faced odds that no one living would dare face!

MARK TOONEY: A gambler and frontier lawyer, he placed his bets on a champion from the grave.

ZOE CORSTAIN: She preferred the quick to the dead and men found it out rapidly.

LOTHAR TRANCAS: Nothing stood in his way except another man's headstone on Boot Hill.

IVIS DRAKE: This Virginia City songbird belonged in no gilded cage.

JUBE CANAVAN: A rustler with an old score to settle and a devil's role to play.

THE MAN FROM BOOT HILL

by DEAN OWEN

ACE BOOKS, INC.
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WILD HORSE RANGE

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CHAPTER ONE

THE HARD RING of spurs against a wooden floor was the first sound he heard as a light somewhere deep in his consciousness began to flicker. High above him a beamed ceiling caught a wash of lamplight. When he tried to rise there was no life in him. Only his mind seemed to live. A murmur of voices drifted to him. Instinctively he sensed those voices belonged to his enemies. He lay unmoving, trying to catalogue the sounds: the rustle of silken skirts, a woman's subtle fragrance, the rank odors of men who live in the saddle.

Abruptly he was aware that his view of the polished ceiling was broken by two faces peering down. A cold terror gripped him for he believed they meant to kill him and he was helpless to defend himself.

One face was dark, narrow. Thin lips beneath a sweeping black mustache were faintly smiling. "Reck Corstain in his coffin," the face said, "looks good to me, Gillis."

The other man grinned, showing a gold tooth. In the lamplight his eyes seemed the color of the blue milk. Suddenly he spat into the coffin, then turned away.

The man in the coffin felt the spittle against his face. His terror abruptly changed to pure hatred. But even this emotion put no life into his body.

The dark man—Lothar Trancas—waved a hand at the bulky Tay Gillis. "Get the boys back to the ranch."

At his words a dozen men who had been standing bareheaded before the huge stone fireplace, put on their hats and moved to the front door.

The few women who had gathered in the big parlor with the crowd of townspeople, muttered their sympathy to a tall, black-haired woman.

"Sorry, Mrs. Corstain," one of them said.

Zoe Corstain stood with clasped hands before a cherry-wood cabinet. Lamplight brought out her full curves, accentuated by a tight-fitting black dress. She seemed to

have deliberately chosen this spot to stand where lamplight would put a halo above her head; an attempt to impress the crowd that she was a young and beautiful widow. As if feeling she had to speak, she let her amber eyes rest on a thin, well-scrubbed man with a star on his vest. "It's your fault this happened, Sheriff," she said.

Sheriff Tom Mendon rubbed a hand over thinning hair that was plastered to his skull with pomade. He looked at Trancas, but Trancas gave a slight shake of his head. The sheriff said, "It wasn't nobody's fault. They'd have hung him anyhow, sooner or later."

Muttering his regrets to the widow, Sheriff Mendon left the room. When the sound of buggy wheels and the tromp of horses had faded from the yard and Trancas and Zoe Corstain were alone in the big house, there was a moment of complete silence.

Then Trancas said, "For the first time we're free, Zoe. No more hiding."

Her amber eyes rested on the coffin that had been placed on a long mahogany table at the far end of the room. "You're sure he's dead?" she whispered.

"Fifty men saw him hang."

Her shoulders seemed to settle beneath the black silk of her dress. Abruptly she turned her back. "Get him out of here, Lothar."

From the corner of her eyes she watched him reach into the coffin. In a moment he lifted his hands, holding a pair of silver spurs.

"You wear Reck Corstain's spurs and people will talk," Zoe said.

Trancas laughed softly. "I'm marrying Reck Corstain's widow. I'll wear his spurs." He inclined his head to stare down at the pale oval of her face. "I've wanted them both for a long time. And to hell with what anybody says."

He made an imposing figure in his black broadcloth suit. Trancas' eyes were a reddish brown except when he was angry, then they turned jet black. There was a deceptive slenderness to him. Power in a body that ex-

pensive clothes could not conceal. A muscular width of shoulders. Strength and a touch of arrogance in his bland, sun-darkened face. A bold man in his early thirties.

Trancas picked up the coffin lid, fitted it in place. The man in the coffin felt a return of his terror as the friendly light, the last warm thing in the world was suddenly gone. He tried to cry out in desperation, but no sound came from his lips. The only sound was in his own mind. This, then, he decided, was death.

A flat-bed wagon carrying a coffin left the Corstain mansion a half hour later, moving down the graveled drive between rows of poplar trees to Jefferson Street where it swung west toward the glowing lights of Apache's business district. A small and nervous little man wearing a hard collar, handled the reins. The butt of a forty-five protruding from an ill-fitting black coat, seemed incongruous on so small a man. The night heat put a film of sweat beneath the tight band of his bowler hat. As undertaker, John Glover commanded a certain respect in Apache.

"I got a good coffin in stock," Glover told the man on the wagon seat at his side. "Been savin' it for somebody important."

Doc Shanley sat hunched forward, elbows resting on his fat thighs. "Reck Corstain deserved to die," he said, staring moodily across Saber Flats. "But even so, it saddens me."

Glover grunted. "Trancas ain't happy with the way you stuck up for the Corstains through all this."

Doc Shanley made no reply. For more years than he cared to remember he had eased the physical pain of these townspeople, slapping the first wail from the newborn, later burying many of the same sons he had helped on their first step in life. Such a man was the one in the coffin.

As he watched the moon rise over the Duarte Hills, his thoughts turned into the past. "Take the handles off that good coffin you've got for Corstain. I've got six solid

silver coffin handles Reck gave me one time. He won them off a Mexican in Hermosillo. He told me he always wanted to be buried in his spurs and have those silver handles on his coffin. Reckon I can do that much for him."

Glover turned the wagon down rutted Corstain Street into the heart of town, past the Corstain Building at the far end of the block. A crowd in front of Bulwar's Saloon caught sight of the wagon and followed it down a narrow alley beside Glover's combination furniture store and undertaking establishment.

Doc Shanley climbed stiffly from the seat, holding the black bag he had needlessly taken to the Corstain house when summoned by news of the lynching. He had arrived too late. The coffin was already closed and ready to load onto the wagon.

He stared at the faces of the curious now drawn by a morbid curiosity to see the remains of the last son of the man who had built this town.

When he asked the men to give him a hand with the coffin, he listened to their bitter voices: "Ain't right to dirty up a cemetery with a Corstain."

"Ought to throw him to the coyotes."

"Only thing I'm sorry about is not bein' there when they hung him."

Doc Shanley listened patiently, knowing they felt justified in their beliefs. But even though reluctant to touch a coffin holding a Corstain most of the men could not forget that Doc Shanley had dug a bullet out of some of them, sewed up a knife slash or tended to the women folks when the kids were born. They moved forward and carried the coffin into a small, evil-smelling room where they rested it on two sawhorses.

When Glover started to shrug out of his coat, Doc Shanley said, "I want to be alone here with Reck."

Glover gave the doctor a suspicious glance. "Mrs. Corstain wants the coffin closed for the services. Ain't no need to fix him up none."

Doc Shanley scowled. In his profession he had been

forced to accept Glover as an unwelcome ally. But he did not like the man. "Get out, Glover."

Glover stared at the doctor's moon face, seeing the small veins around the nose and under the eyes. Shanley had removed a bottle from his hip pocket. Now he took a long drink, but did not pass the bottle to Glover.

"I got another body here," Glover said. "Got to fix him up for the funeral tomorrow. Got to bury 'em quick this kind of weather."

Shanley followed Glover's eyes to another coffin that rested on a long shelf. "Who is it?"

"Rider out at the JG. Got pinned by a horse. Horse rolled on him. Ain't much left of the fella."

"You can do that later, Glover."

A muscle quivered in Glover's cheek. "I ain't leavin', Doc." His eyes began to shine. "You was talkin' about solid silver coffin handles. Maybe you and me—"

Doc Shanley jerked a fat fist toward the door. "How many of our departed citizens have had the gold chiseled from their teeth before you buried them? If I ever told all I suspect about you, they'd run you out of town—or worse. Even your friend Lothar Trancas couldn't prevent that."

The man in the coffin had been vaguely aware of voices. So far as he could tell he had never heard them before. In a moment he was aware that the coffin lid was removed. A lined, worn face peered down at him. A pair of muddy brown eyes watched him.

Doc Shanley fumbled at his feet a moment, then said bitterly, "So they already stole your spurs."

For a long moment Doc Shanley stood there shaking his gray head. He took another drink. Outside the town had quieted. The harsh laughter of a drunk from Bulwar's Saloon down the block was a sharp sound against the night. As the old doctor peered into the coffin, his brown eyes suddenly sharpened on the still white face. Suddenly he snatched up a lamp, held it high. With one hand he wiped the forehead of the man in the box.

"Perspiration," Doc Shanley muttered. "A dead man doesn't perspire." He stood, awed, then said, "If they find out you still live, they'll try again, Reck. This time they'll hang you right."

Quickly Doc Shanley bolted the door, pulled a curtain over the single window. Then he returned to the coffin, probing around the man's neck with strong fingers. "That damned bungling Glover pronounced you dead. But if I'd been there—" Shanley's shoulders sagged. "Perhaps it was just as well."

The man in the box was aware that the doctor probed every inch of his long body. Sweat he could feel, for a drop of it had rolled into a corner of his eye. Behind his eyes a pulse was painful with its every beat. He attempted to scream, but there was only empty sound.

When Doc Shanley raised up from the coffin, his face looked stricken. "You're paralyzed, Reck," he said as if to himself. "Likely you'll never walk again. And when they find you they'll kill you."

For a long moment Doc Shanley was silent, then he said, "No matter what you've done, I've got to help you. If only for the memory of your dead mother." He gripped the edges of the coffin. "I was in love with your mother, Reck. When she died, I died with her."

The man in the coffin would be tall if he could stand on his feet. His face was heavily browned from the sun. He had a good nose and a strong mouth. He might have been handsome, save for the blood on his face, the bruises and the purple discolorations around his eyes.

The man found the words in his mind but he could not scream them. Silently he cried: "My name is not Reck Corstain. I never saw you before in my life!"

CHAPTER TWO

CHARLIE SEAWRIGHT was not a vicious man by nature, but the disappointments of trying to scrape out a bare existence in the West were beginning to pull his nerves to the breaking point. His theatrical troupe had found

small favor in the mining camps that dotted the Sierras. In fact the whole venture had been a miserable failure. Even assuming the burden of delivering the paralyzed man to San Francisco had turned out badly. At first, when the two peons had brought the living dead man to his wagon just after they had crossed the Colorado, it seemed like a good idea to take him along. After all, there had been three hundred dollars in gold. All he had to do was deliver this man to a hospital in San Francisco. But the three hundred dollars was long since gone, and the burden of feeding this helpless man weighed heavily on him.

He was bitterly reminded of this one night when the three wagons pulled into a circle in the thick pines near the Nevada border. Ivis Drake, the girl who had wanted to be an actress, was feeding this stranger, holding a bowl of broth to his lips. Ivis had joined the troupe in New Orleans and in her fresh beauty Seawright had found a certain lift to his confidence. But so far she had spurned him. To make matters worse she had personally taken it upon herself to nurse this man with no memory.

Seawright rose from a log where he had been darkly contemplating his fortunes and strode down to the campfire. Some women might have considered him handsome with his long curling blond hair, his pink-cheeked face. But to Ivis Drake he was vain, womanish in his tempers when the troupe failed to make expenses.

Now Seawright said angrily, "Seems a damn waste of time and money, cluttering up good space with a living dead man."

The man known only as Reck, stared at him from metal gray eyes. He was on the ground, his back against a boulder. Angrily he shoved aside the bowl of broth Ivis Drake held for him.

In him he felt a stirring of anger against this handsome man who strutted the boards of the portable stage he had watched them set up in the mining camps. He wanted to remember how and why he was here but his memory was a long and dark corridor with a locked door at the end. When he tried to think the pain returned to his

temples. Even now, after many weeks, he could not turn his neck without experiencing pain.

Ivis Drake said, "You've been well paid for his passage, Seawright."

Seawright angrily turned on his heel. Ivis Drake called to two of the actors who had finished their evening meal. Between the three of them they got the man known as Reck into the only home he could ever remember, a canvas-topped wagon.

The only joy he experienced, if joy it was, came when he saw Ivis. She had hair the color of sunlight through October leaves. He remembered how cool her hands had been all these weeks on his tortured neck. And he recalled the shock of pain when she bathed the great jagged wound in his back. But little else did he remember.

Two days later as the caravan descended into the Washoe Valley, his wagon lost a wheel. The sharp tilt of the wagon bed threw him heavily against the sideboards. When the dust had settled he saw Ivis Drake at the tailgate, her blue eyes sharp with concern. She found him sitting up, supporting his weight with his hands. For a moment he held his position with obvious pain. Sweat glistened through the beard on his cheeks. Suddenly his strength ran out of him and he fell back.

A brief smile touched the girl's lips, and she said, "You're going to be all right. You still have feeling in those hands and arms. And you have strength."

He wanted to match her smile, to show that he was grateful for her interest. But there was no humor in him.

By the time they reached the outskirts of Carson City he was able to hobble about with a cane. The other women of the troupe found little interest in him until the day he borrowed a razor and cut the beard from his cheeks.

For the first time he began to take an interest in his surroundings, noticing the sharp rise of the pine-clad mountains, the scent of spring in the air. One night he asked Ivis how she happened to be with this troupe.

She had come out boldly from New York, sailing to New Orleans. There she had failed to find a job singing

and in desperation had agreed to join Seawright's company for a swing through the west.

That night he heard Seawright's voice booming drunkenly from his wagon. "We're about broke. We're going on to Frisco. And we're traveling light. I'm taking care of your friend Reck once and for all."

He stiffened when a light step sounded outside his wagon. He turned to see Ivis Drake's curved figure against the backdrop of light from a campfire. He saw her oval high-cheeked face. There was a warmth and a concern in her dark blue eyes. Her red lips were slightly parted. She came close, pressing a derringer into his hand.

"Come quickly," she whispered. "Seawright's drunk. You've got to get away or he'll kill you."

In this moment, despite the threat of danger, he was aware that she was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. He climbed stiffly from the wagon, feeling a tremble in his knees.

Seawright appeared suddenly around the tail of the wagon. In one hand he clutched a bottle. The other hand he moved to his belt. Firelight played across his thin face as he stared at the man with the cane.

The man known as Reck said, "Don't touch a gun, or I'll kill you."

Seawright stiffened, glancing down the draw where the rest of the troupe lounged around a fire. Here at the wagon they were in deep shadow and the others were not aware of trouble.

Seawright, staring at the derringer in the stranger's bony hand, suddenly laughed. He turned to his wagon and in a moment came back carrying a canvas-wrapped package.

"As long as you're leaving," he snarled drunkenly, "take your belongings. If they were worth anything I'd keep them for your passage."

He flung the package at Reck's feet. The canvas came untied and six metal objects clattered across the ground.

The man stared at them a long moment, seeing they were identical in pattern.

"Coffin handles," he said through his teeth, and stooped for them but the effort brought a groan to his lips.

Ivis picked them up. The girl held them in the canvas wrapping and now he could see that each of the handles was covered with a coat of cheap black paint.

They moved off down the road together, the man hobbling with his cane, the derringer still clutched in his sweating fingers. The girl walked at his side, holding the coffin handles. Ahead lay the glowing lights of Carson City. In the moonlight he could see the glint of snow on the mountain slopes.

The effort of walking cost him much and she hailed a passing wagon and got them to Carson City. The stage for Virginia City was ready to leave and she bought them passage and by morning they were on the Comstock.

They took rooms in a house below "C" Street, and when she had gone to her own quarters he felt the first impact of loneliness. Later that day she returned to his room. He stared at the smooth oval of her vibrant face, noticing how a cameo lay nestled in the cleft of her full bosom. She seemed happy and he wondered why.

"Virginia City has appreciated my talents already," she said, her lips curling in a warm smile. "I have a job. You should be proud of me, Reck. I'm working at the Tivoli."

He stood at the foot of a big brass bed, aware of the odors of a hundred previous lodgers, seeing the cracked window, the commode and the broken pitcher. Above the pitcher was a mirror hung against dirty wall paper.

Until now he had deliberately avoided mirrors, aware of an unconscious horror at the prospect of seeing his own face. Now, from beneath brows yellowed by the sun, he stared at his reflection. For the first time he could ever remember he was seeing himself.

He saw that his hair was the color of sunbleached rope. His eyes, enormous in the bony frame of his face, were metal gray. Beneath the strong bony hook of his nose

his mouth cut a sharp line across his face. He lifted a hand to his nose that had once been broken and not properly set. He moved his fingers to a bone-white scar at his right temple.

"You called me Reck," he said. "Tell me about myself. All of it. Spare nothing."

Until now he had avoided any questions, for he was afraid of the past. But he could evade it no longer.

She told him how two Mexicans had brought him to Seawright when they were camped on the banks of the Colorado. They paid Seawright for his passage to San Francisco. Outside of that she knew nothing.

He pulled her to him roughly, seeing how lamplight caught the full curve of her breast. Feeling the pressure of her young body against his own stirred his blood. Then the back of his neck began to throb and the ache returned to his temples as it always did when he tried to think of the past.

"Don't try to remember, Reck," she said softly.

He stepped away from her, dropping his hands, and was aware of a disappointment in her eyes. "I'm good for no woman," he said thickly. "Not until I can remember the past."

He stood there, listening to the pulse of Virginia City: the thud of stamp mills, the raucous voices from the streets. Then he lowered his eyes to the bed where he had spread out the six coffin handles.

"Is this all I had with me?" he asked her.

She nodded, her copper-colored hair glistening.

Deliberately he gathered up the coffin handles. "Somebody's idea of a joke," he said angrily. Stepping to the open window he dropped them into the alley. For a long moment he stared down at them in a litter of tin cans and broken bottles. "The last connection with my past," he said grimly. "From here it's a fresh start."

She came to stand by his side. She was a tall girl, graceful and well-formed. Life for her had not been easy, he decided, but her scars, if any, did not show. She had a man's direct way of talking and looking at you. He let

his fingers gently stroke the length of her jaw, feeling the fine bone structure beneath her skin. She closed her eyes, her moist lips parted. He lowered his head to her mouth, then abruptly straightened.

She turned to the door, saying, "Wish me luck, Reck. My first job in Virginia City and I'm scared."

It was many hours later that he heard her voice coming from the street. He rose from the bed, aware that daylight was penciling the hills beyond the town. He saw her silhouetted at the street corner. A man's bulky figure threw a dark shadow. The man said something, tipped his hat and climbed into a buggy and drove up the hill.

For the first time in his short memory, Reck felt a stab of jealousy. He waited there, unmoving as Ivis slipped into the room.

"Are you awake, Reck?"

Without turning he said, "What sort of a job do you have?"

"I'm a singer." Then her voice tightened. "What kind of a job did you think I had?"

"A man brought you home."

"The Tivoli owner. Mark Tooney. It isn't safe for a woman alone on the streets this time of night." She came to stand at his side. "You're angry."

"Some day," Reck said, "Tooney won't take his goodnights at the front door."

He heard her sharp indrawn breath and instantly regretted his words. But it was too late. "Your memory must be returning," she said with a trace of scorn. "Who treated you so badly in that past life of yours that you could think such a thing about a woman?"

"I seem to remember," he said, his own anger kindled from her own, "that a woman is to be trusted no longer than a man can draw a deep breath."

She whirled from the room. For a long moment he stood, aware of the fragrance of lilacs she had left behind. He wanted to go after her, but a stubborn pride forced him to remain in the room.

On the heels of his anger came a returning of the old terror which was the only thing he could recall from his misty past. Somewhere men waited to kill him. That much he sensed. But who they were he did not know.

The mutter of voices in the alley awakened him the next morning. Irritated at the disturbance, he pulled on his clothes and moved to the window. Two men poked around in the alley rubbish. He was about to tell them to be on their way when something held him. One of the pair, fat and untidy, had fished one of the coffin handles from a litter of tin cans. He called his companion, a lathy man wearing a greasy brown suit.

"Ain't no pickin's here, Dave," he grunted. "Not unless we can sell coffin handles."

The man called Dave had gathered up the other five handles and stood there regarding them in the faint light. Suddenly he stiffened. "Looky here, Charlie. The paint's been chipped off."

The two men bent their heads over the coffin handles.

Aware of a slight tremor along his thighs, Reck watched them scrape away the paint with knife blades.

Dave said excitedly, "If these ain't silver I'll eat your hat for breakfast."

Charlie nodded. "Why would any fool cover up solid silver with black paint?"

"That ain't our worry. We oughta get enough for a dozen bottles of Dunlap's Whiskey for these. Come on."

When they started off down the alley, Reck threw a leg over the sill, dropped to the ground. In the murky light the sudden appearance of his thin figure startled them.

"You've got my property there," Reck said, indicating the coffin handles with a jerk of his head. "I dropped them out of the window by mistake."

The men started backing up toward the street. Reck knew in his condition he could never catch them should they start to run. He had picked up the derringer from the commode. Now he leveled it at them. "I'd hate to kill

you over a few coffin handles," he said, "but I will if I have to."

They argued and then pleaded to keep one coffin handle apiece. Reck shook his head. He advanced on them, the derringer rock steady in his hand. There must have been something in his eyes that decided them. They dropped the handles and cursing, moved up the street and disappeared into another alley where the pickings might be more fruitful.

The rest of that morning Reck spent scraping the cheap black paint off the coffin handles. His head hammered with the possibilities this disclosure might mean to him. Somebody had painted the handles to hide the fact that they were silver. Who had done it and why? The questions raced in his mind until his head began to ache again. When the handles were clean he studied one of them in the light of the open window. In letters so fine as to be hardly visible to the naked eye he read: *J. Ballesteros. Hermosillo.*

Some thought buried deep within him struggled for expression. He knew it had something to do with these silver coffin handles. But the fear was in him again and he refused to think about it.

Eagerly he hid five of the handles, and taking the sixth, climbed the hill to "C" Street and Daley's Loan House.

Daley, rubbing plump hands on a black satin vest, said, "I got no use for one coffin handle. If a man can't afford to buy a set to bury himself with he ain't got no right bein' dead."

Reck said, "Take a close look at it. Maybe you'll change your mind."

Daley adjusted a pair of oblong steel-rimmed glasses over his long nose and inspected the coffin handle closely. He flashed this tall somber man a puzzled look and disappeared into a back room. In a few moments he returned, saying, "I'll give you forty dollars."

Reck studied Daley a moment, then said, "You're a thief, but throw in a gun and I'll sign your book."

Almost eagerly Daley laid a drawer of revolvers on the counter. Reck handled the various weapons, testing them, earing back the hammers.

Daley said shrewdly, "You're a man who knows guns. You must have handled plenty in your time."

Reck nodded, feeling an old familiarity in the .44 he selected. The gun he stuffed into the waistband of his trousers. He signed Daley's book, took the forty dollars and sauntered along the boardwalk, conscious of a new excitement in him. The feel of gold in his hand helped him to forget that he had arrived in this raw town dead broke. At a "C" Street store he bought boots and shirts and a pair of heavy wool pants.

Attired in his new clothing he felt a measure of self respect. But his new-found elation was dampened when he recalled the scene with Ivis Drake last night; he had spoken in bitterness and haste. Had it not been for her he probably would now be rotting somewhere along the Carson Trail. He wanted to share his good fortune of the silver coffin handles and his only friend in this new life of his was the girl. Impatiently he purchased a bottle of wine and some food and strode down the hill to the rooming house. It was the wrong time of day for such a celebration but there was a new urgency in him now as if sensing his horizon might soon lift just enough to give him a glimpse into the past. When that happened he did not want to be alone.

He skirted an ore wagon toiling up the hill, pushed his way through a crowd of miners coming off shift and moved down the shadowy hallway to Ivis Drake's room. There was no answer to his knock. He found the landlady scrubbing the second floor hall.

"Them kind come and go," the woman said tiredly, when Reck asked her about Ivis.

He felt a tightening in his throat and his temples began to throb with that old familiar pain.

"She didn't say where she was movin' to," the landlady went on, wringing her mop in a pail of soapy water. "A

gentleman came and helped her move her things. A fine carriage he had—"

Reck shoved the package of food and wine into the soapy hands. "Maybe you can use this," he said gruffly, and went outside.

Angered that she would leave without telling him, he went to his room, wrapped the remaining five coffin handles in the square of canvas and departed. The turmoil of Virginia City did nothing to quiet his nerves: frock-coated men rushing for the Exchange; the stage disgorging another load of eager passengers, intent on winning a fortune here on the Comstock. A woman touched his arm and smiled with her red mouth, but he turned away.

Standing disconsolately at the edge of the wooden gutter in front of the Wells Fargo office, he let the human tide sweep around him while he considered his next move. A freighter of China silk was being unloaded next door. It came to him then, as he watched the rattan bales being moved across the plank walk and into a store. China. He could catch a clipper ship out of Frisco. In the orient he could forget whatever it was about his past he didn't wish to remember.

He bought a ticket on the Frisco stage and waited with a rising impatience for the hour of departure. It was late in the afternoon when his eye caught a sign. Red and white with a picture of a dancing girl: *The Tivoli.* Purposely he had avoided hunting for Ivis, but half a dozen whiskies had clouded his reason, for in his weakened condition the liquor had been unusually potent.

Only one customer sat at the long bar. Across the back wall was an entertainer's platform. A drum and cornet were fastened to a square piano with a heavy chain. The Tivoli, it seemed, did not trust its patrons.

"What time do the girls come?" Reck asked a bald and perspiring barkeep.

"Six o'clock, friend." He winked at the tall, bony man who leaned his elbows on the bartop. "Our girls here only sing. If you want the other kind, try Madam Cocteau's.

Tell her Fred sent you. I get a cut on the customers I send over."

"I'll take the singing kind," Reck said, and ordered a drink.

It was some time later when whisky had put a cottony film across his vision that he heard a door slam in a darkly-paneled corridor at the end of the barroom.

Ivis Drake's angry voice drifted up to him: "It wasn't like that at all, Mr. Tooney!"

A man's voice, heavy with insinuation, said: "Guess you haven't been in this business very long. Last night I took you home. Today when you needed help to find new lodgings you came to me. I thought you were looking on me with favor."

"I came here to rehearse some songs," Ivis said. "I—I didn't think it would end like this. I'm quitting, Mr. Tooney."

Reck had turned, seeing her in the corridor, tall, her shoulders squared. Today she wore a green dress that set off the coils of her coppery hair. Reck pushed aside his bundle of coffin handles, advanced the length of the big room where a tall man faced the girl. A chandelier had been lighted in the corridor and Reck could see the man's aristocratic features in the yellow glow.

Fred, the fat bartender, picked up a sawed-off pool cue and kept pace with him down the length of the bar.

"Reck!" It was Ivis who heard the footsteps. She had turned, her dark blue eyes sharp with concern. She tried to clutch him by the arm but he jerked free, sent her spinning against a table so that her reddish hair came unpinned.

Mark Tooney, grinning slightly, put a hand beneath his black coat. "Get out while you can still walk."

Ivis was staring at Reck's face, seeing the wildness in his metal gray eyes, the tight set of his big mouth. His face was flushed from the whisky. She let her eyes drop to the butt of the big gun stuffed into his belt. Again she tried to take him by the arm. "Please, Reck," she whispered. "Take me out of here."

Anger had cleared his head and now he saw that he had walked into a trap. The fat bartender was slightly behind him, exchanging his pool cue for a sawed-off shotgun. Tooney, his hand still under his coat, seemed to find a measure of enjoyment in the situation.

Suddenly, as Reck stepped directly under the glow of the chandelier, Tooney lost his smile. For a long moment he stared at the tall man. Then, abruptly, he held up both hands as if to show by this gesture that he suddenly wanted no trouble.

"I've made a mistake," he said suavely. "If you think so much of this girl you want to fight me, then I'm obviously in the wrong. I misjudged her intentions."

Reck watched him closely. He had been ready to grab that gun from his belt if Tooney had made another move toward the weapon he obviously carried beneath his coat. But the man had suddenly lost his faintly jeering smile and appeared to want no trouble. It puzzled Reck, made him wary.

Tooney, he saw, was a man who dressed immaculately. He had aristocratic features, untouched by the sun. But the rough life here had marked him. His hair showed a fleck of gray at the temples; his eyes held a sharp appraisal as if he based his safety on his evaluation of a man. Bitterness pulled his lips into a crooked smile, edged into his voice when he said, "Whenever I find a desirable woman she's already spoken for." He touched Reck lightly on the arm. "You and Miss Drake be my guests for dinner. I want to make amends." He turned to Ivis. "And I don't want you to quit your job here."

Reck started to escort Ivis from the barroom, but the girl dug fingernails into his arm. "Please, Reck," she whispered. Her eyes said she wanted no more trouble, that she wanted him to accept Tooney's invitation.

They were seated at a table covered with a snowy white cloth when Reck remembered his coffin handles. He stepped to the bar. The fat barkeep defiantly said he had not seen them.

"Typical Virginia City saloon," Reck said through his tight lips. "Even steal the gold in a man's teeth—"

He stiffened. His brain seemed to spin. *Gold in a man's teeth.* That phrase put a thin edge of light somewhere in the back of his mind. He vaguely recalled two men talking about gold and about teeth. But when he tried to bring the thought into the full light of his consciousness the old barrier was there.

Tooney, stepping to the bar said, "This is a friend of mine, Fred. If he left something here, give it to him."

Fred stared at his boss a moment, then lifted the canvas-wrapped package from a shelf behind the bar and passed it over to Reck.

When the meal was half finished, Tooney excused himself, saying he had just remembered some important business that had to be taken care of. He moved toward a rear door at the end of the corridor, his heels clicking on the plank floor with an almost womanish rhythm.

Reck watched the play of lamplight across Ivis Drake's lovely face. "What's Tooney up to?"

She shrugged a green-clad shoulder. She looked worried. "Do you think he recognized you, Reck? When you stepped under the chandelier he suddenly didn't want trouble."

"I'm a fool to stay here," he said, his eyes sweeping the barroom that was now beginning to fill up with the white-shirted men who had spent the day gambling their fortunes on the Exchange. A prideful man, Reck hated to admit he had been wrong. "I'm sorry for what I said last night." He looked down at his clasped hands. "In my own past I was probably a lot worse than—"

"A lot worse than what?" An edge had crept into her voice. She held her breath, her bosom tight against the green fabric of her dress. "I'm a singer, Reck. Nothing more."

He nodded. "I didn't mean it the way it sounded. I don't think I'm usually a jealous man. But I'm afraid of being alone."

She put a hand on his wrist, her fingers cool against

his skin. "There's one thing I can never do," she said gently, "help you remember the past."

In the Tivoli office Mark Tooney impatiently fingered through a sheaf of papers on his flat-topped desk. A grunt of satisfaction escaped his lips when he finally found what he was searching for; a dog-eared photograph. As he stared at the photo, holding it under the lamp on the desk, his hazel eyes grew thoughtful.

The office though small was tastefully furnished. Bookshelves lined three of the walls from floor to ceiling. Volumes of law books: Adams Territorial Law, a complete set of Blackstone. Above the desk a frame certificate proclaimed to the world that Mark Tooney was licensed to practice law in Nevada Territory.

Tooney laid the photograph aside, stepped to the door. A lathy, red-haired man named Joe Wilder was just hanging his flat-crowned hat on a hook in the corridor. Tooney jerked his head at the man. "Got a job for you, Joe," he whispered.

In the office, Wilder leaned a shoulder against the door and rolled a cigarette. Tooney stared at the man a moment, feeling a certain revulsion in the cold blue eyes, the tight mouth. Wilder's business was killing. He hated this facet of his business here in Virginia City. But it was necessary to have a gunman of Wilder's reputation to discourage would-be trouble-makers in the Tivoli.

Tooney said, "Remember the bald-headed drunk we—er—took care of last night?"

A faint grin touched Wilder's lips. "You mean the one we doped and threw in the alley?"

Tooney stiffened. He did not like Wilder, he liked him less tonight. But he needed him. It sickened him inwardly to realize how far he had sunk into the mire of Virginia City. Whenever he saw Wilder he was reminded of that. Doping a man's drink, robbing him. Would it be murder next? He shivered slightly. The law he had sworn to uphold when that license above the bookshelf was issued, had become a mockery in Virginia City. He was no

longer welcome in a courtroom. In fact, he was no longer a lawyer. His own profession had been taken from him. The license was only a reminder of the past.

Tooney frowned at the papers on the desk. "The man's name is John P. Glover, according to the stuff we found on him. He's got a Wells Fargo claim check stamped Washoe Hotel. Tell him we've found his wallet and that he's to return with you and claim it. That should bring him running."

"I'll get him," Wilder grunted, and opening a side door, stepped into the alley and disappeared.

Tooney returned to Reck and Ivis, a bottle of chilled wine under his arm. "Sorry I had to leave," he explained.

Reck watched the man, seeing the amused smile again on his lips. Somehow he sensed this Mark Tooney was a link to the past. But so far as he could tell he had never seen the man before.

CHAPTER THREE

THE ORCHESTRA had begun to play. A blond girl was singing and when she finished, the crowded barroom was wild with applause. Reck's eyes were on Tooney.

When they were halfway through their pheasant, a bartender came to the table, whispered something to Tooney.

"Somebody waiting in my office," Tooney said. "Go ahead and finish your supper without me. And there's more wine."

He grinned. Reck watched him thread his way through the jam of men around the bar, a thoughtful frown on his forehead. Tooney stepped through a doorway.

The red-haired Wilder lounged with a hip over the edge of the desk, swinging a foot. He jerked his thumb at a nervous, bald little man, who swung a hard hat around his fingers.

"John P. Glover," Wilder said.

Glover had been looking at the lined bookshelves. Now he spun on his heel when Tooney entered the office. "You've got my money and my papers?" he cried.

Tooney spread his hands. "I try to protect my customers. But sometimes an outsider makes trouble. The man who caused your—er—inconvenience last night has been discharged. I hope you weren't too ill."

Tooney uncovered a leather folder from a pile of papers on the desk.

Glover pounced on it eagerly. Then his narrow face darkened. "You went through my papers," he accused.

"How else could I learn where you were staying?"

Some of the fire left Glover's eyes. He seemed ill-at-ease in his tight black suit. He kept digging a finger around the edge of his hard collar. Beneath his coat he wore a forty-five that would seem to weigh down so small a man.

Tooney said, watching his face, "I stumbled onto something that might be worth a great deal of money."

Greed edged into Glover's eyes. "Money?" he said, and rubbed his thin hands.

Tooney threw a newspaper clipping on the desk. "It's the story of a man named Reck Corstain who was beaten by a mob and hanged to his own shed wall."

John P. Glover's small head jerked up. "Reck Corstain," he whispered. "What about him?"

"I found his picture among the papers in your wallet."

Glover shook his head. "If you're figuring to make money out of that fact, you're wasting your time and mine. Reck Corstain is dead. That's the end of it."

"You're sure he's dead?"

Glover stared at the tall ex-lawyer. He licked his lips. "Reck Corstain is as dead as any man could be."

"How do you know?"

Glover fingered the sweat band of his bowler hat. "How do I know?" he said derisively. "Hell, I was there when the boys caught him ridin' in from the Broken Wheel. There was about twenty of 'em and they beat him half to death. Then they got a rope and hanged him. I seen him there, so bloody and so battered you couldn't recognize him. And I was there at the funeral. There's a headstone

on his grave back in Apache and it says that Reck Corstain is layin' under it and that's where he is."

"And if there could be a mistake about him being there," Tooney said softly, "what then?"

Even Joe Wilder seemed to sense something of importance about to be revealed here. He rose from the edge of the desk, peering at Glover intently.

The little man sank weakly into a chair. Color had receded from his cheeks giving them a doughy look. "Are you tryin' to tell me that Reck Corstain is still alive?" he said hoarsely.

"It's possible."

"But I'm an undertaker. I seen the dead ones all my life. I helped load Reck Corstain into his coffin. I know when a man is dead and when he ain't."

Tooney shrugged. "Then it's only a coincidence."

Glover leaped to his feet, visibly trembling. "You seen somebody that looks like Reck Corstain?"

For a long moment Tooney made no reply, while music and the laughter of girls, the scrape of booted feet on the dance floor filtered into the small office.

"It's not somebody who looks like Reck Corstain," Tooney said. "I've seen Reck Corstain—alive!"

Glover's eyes were frightened. He glanced at Wilder, then at Tooney. "Where is he?"

Tooney smiled. "That's where the money comes in. Is Reck Corstain worth more alive, or is he worth more dead?"

"Dead," Glover said suddenly. "He ain't worth a *peso* alive."

Tooney studied Glover's thin face. "You're afraid of Corstain, aren't you?"

Glover threw back his head and laughed. "Me afraid of Reck Corstain? Hell, he was the biggest coward that ever dragged a spur—unless he had his boys with him. I ain't afraid of him. But if he's got half a dozen fellas with him he'd kill me."

"You don't think much of Corstain."

"Who did? When he died there wasn't a tear shed. Ex-

cept maybe Doc Shanley." Glover stood there shaking his head. "No, sir. Nobody was ever afraid of Reck Corstain when he was alone—not even me."

"Then he's not worth killing," Tooney said.

"He's worth a thousand dollars—dead."

Tooney gave a short laugh. "He'd pay that much just to stay alive."

Glover chewed his short underlip. "Ain't much Reck Corstain could do, but if he was to show up alive it might make a lot of people unhappy."

"Who, for instance?"

"His widow, for one thing. She's fixin' to marry somebody else."

Tooney lost his patience. "I want the story. The whole story. There's talk of the railroad coming through Apache. Somehow I've got a hunch it ties in with Reck Corstain."

Suddenly Glover's small mouth tightened. "Before I tell you everything, how do I know Reck Corstain is still alive? You got proof?"

For a moment Tooney was thoughtful, then he said, "Corstain arrived in Nevada with a girl who now works for me. She doesn't know anything about him except that two Mexicans paid the boss of a theatrical troupe to bring him to Frisco. The man was paralyzed. Now he can move about. But his memory is gone. She told me all about it last night."

Glover's eyes brightened. "I'm beginning to get some ideas. Maybe that's why Doc Shanley has been shuttin' himself up in his house, drinkin' himself to death." He snapped his fingers. "Sure, that's the way it is. Doc got them Mexicans to take Reck out of town. And Doc knows if Lothar Trancas ever learns the truth it'll be the end for him."

Tooney nodded. "I had a hunch about this man called Reck. When I saw this photograph and then saw him in person this afternoon I knew he was one and the same."

Glover said, "Guess I'll be goin'."

Wilder, who lounged by the alley door, let his hand fall to the walnut grips of the heavy gun at his belt.

Glover licked his lips, stood nervously in the center of the small office.

Tooney, that amused smile back on his lips, poured a drink. "We'll have a drink—partner."

Glover took the shot glass Tooney had filled, raised it to his lips with a trembling hand.

Tooney said, "With a railroad involved it means a lot of money. I'll keep Reck Corstain in a safe place until you bring me ten thousand dollars in gold."

Glover's jaw fell. "I can't raise that kind of money."

"But you have friends in Apache who can." Tooney's face had hardened. "When you get back to your hotel, write some letters. I'll be expecting to hear from you."

Glover nervously picked up his leather folder. Wilder moved aside so Glover could open the alley door. Tooney had stepped to the door leading to the corridor and the barroom. "I'll keep in touch with you, Glover. And no tricks. This is my town. You won't live very long if you try to get fancy with me."

Tooney opened the door. Reck Corstain stood facing him.

For an instant the three men stood rigid. The man in the corridor lifted a hand to the bone-white scar on his temple. His face was bloodless, a certain wildness edging into his metal gray eyes.

"So I'm a coward," he said savagely, his gaze seeking out the trembling Glover. "Maybe in that other life I was a coward. But not in this one!"

Glover stood as if transfixed. Suddenly a squeal of fright broke from his lips as if the realization that Reck Corstain still lived was too great a blow. He had seen this man lying dead in a coffin in the Corstain parlor. Now Corstain stood before him. Glover had just heard him speak.

Reck's eyes swung to Wilder who had whipped around at Glover's frightened scream. Wilder's hand instinctively dug for his gun when Glover cried out: "Reck Corstain!"

Above the din of music and scraping feet from the bar-

room, Tooney's warning was a frantic note, "No, Wilder, no! I want Corstain *alive!*"

But Wilder seemed not to hear. His breed lived on thin nerves and a reflex drove a hand for the walnut grips of his forty-five. From the doorway Reck saw Wilder's draw. He pulled his own gun from the waistband of his trousers before the snout of Wilder's weapon had fully cleared leather. Reck's gun arced up, smashed a bullet at Wilder. The heavy lead slug threw Wilder heavily against one of the bookshelves. He spun, hands clawing at the books. Still he had not dropped his gun. He tried to swing it up. Reck shot him again, seeing the flash of color spread across his shirtfront. Wilder pitched forward his body striking the desk, overturning it.

A combination of fear and desperation gave John Glover the courage to face this living dead man. His gun was on a swivel holster. Instead of drawing, he tilted gun and holster, firing from the hip. Reck felt the sting of splinters against his stiffened neck as the bullet smashed into the door frame by his head.

Reck dodged aside, turning the big revolver with the silver handle so that the muzzle sought out Glover. The undertaker squealed, tried to fire again but a bullet smashed him in the chest. He broke in the middle, took a stumbling step toward the alley door. Bent over as he was he offered a small target when he tried to shoot Reck in the groin. Reck's bullet found him first, in the top of his bald head.

The silence was sudden and complete as gun echoes still rocked the small office. Reck turned, half-expecting to see Mark Tooney with a drawn gun. But the Tivoli owner stood with hands raised. Already men were yelling from the barroom and booted feet stomped in the corridor.

"Deal with me, Corstain," Tooney said quickly. "Either that or you'll never leave Virginia City alive!"

Reck glanced over his shoulder, seeing the surge of men crowding down the narrow hallway. He was acting now with pure instinct. He kicked the door shut behind

him, leaping toward Tooney. He struck the saloonman a glancing blow across the temple with his gun muzzle. As Tooney was falling, Reck made the alley door, rushing out into the darkness.

A block away he lost himself in the crowd, then doubled back toward the Tivoli. Chancing detection, he boldly entered the Tivoli, for the crowd was congregated at the rear of the big saloon, fighting for a chance to see what had caused the shooting.

"Two dead'uns back there!" a man shouted.

Unnoticed, Reck found Ivis near the front door, her face as white as the cloth on the table that had held their feast. Quickly he drew her to the street.

"Thank God you're alive," she breathed as they hurried away in the darkness.

"You've got to get out of Virginia City," he told her gruffly. "I don't want you mixed up in this. Frisco's the place for you. A pretty woman with a voice can always get work."

They gathered up her few effects at her new lodging house. Into the full blackness of a stormy night they rode the stage down Geiger Grade to the Washoe Valley. On the way he told her of the fight in Tooney's office. It had taken him hours to turn all the facets over in his mind and view them objectively.

When he finished, Ivis said, "Did you recognize this man Glover?"

He swore softly. "So far as I can tell, I never saw him before. That's what gave me the trembles. Glover knew me, but I didn't know him."

In the full light of a murky dawn they reached the outskirts of Carson City. He pointed to a slot in the wall of the Sierras. "Through there you'll find Donner Pass and Frisco—"

She turned to him quickly, clutching his arm. "Reck, don't you see what this means? If you recognize Donner Pass it means you must have been in this country before."

Bitterly he said, "I've probably been in a lot of places and done a lot of things."

"Maybe here you'll find someone who knows you."

They entered a cafe filled with rough miners from Virginia City; teamsters, their heavy rigs braked in the street outside.

This was to be the hard part, to tell her of his decision. "You'll have to go on alone," he told her gruffly. "It can't be any other way." When he saw the hurt in her eyes, he added, "I'm sorry, Ivis."

"But what will you do?"

"I'm going back to Apache. There are things there left undone."

"Let me go with you," she pleaded, grabbing for his hand.

He shook his head. "Apache is no place for you."

"I want to be with you."

His breakfast of sausage and eggs was tasteless. He shoved the platter aside, reached for his mug of coffee. "Glover said I was practically the yellowest thing that ever walked on two legs. I want to find out if it's true."

There was no arguing with him. His mind was made up. In the bright Nevada noonday he saw her to the Frisco stage. When she tilted her face up to him he did not kiss her, for he was only too aware of his weakness. As the team hit their collars, she lifted a small hand in farewell. For a long moment he stood watching the stage rocking along the rutted road. Then he turned. Once in the street he looked back, seeing a faint plume of dust against the sky to mark the passing of Ivis Drake from his life.

Feeling an emptiness, Reck moved to a crowded saloon, shoved his way to the bar and ordered a drink. Idly he savored his whisky, watching a poker game at one of the back tables. What would his next move be in this strange new life of his?

He was considering that when a man with snow-white hair detached himself from a group of drunken miners and staggered up. The old man turned a pair of bloodshot eyes on Reck, grinning crookedly.

"Buy you a drink, Jim?" he said.

Reck stared at the man, seeing his greasy overalls, his tattered shirt. "You've got the wrong man," he said. "My name isn't Jim."

The old man scratched his gray head. "You sure look an awful lot like Jim Bryan."

Reck shook his head, sensing the old man was taking this means of cadging a drink. "My name is—" He started to say "Corstain" but caught himself in time. Reck Corstain was supposed to be dead. He shuddered, wondering what the cards would have held for him if he had not become suspicious of Tooney's actions and followed him down the corridor to listen at the office door.

Drunk as he was, the old man seemed to read some hidden meaning into Reck's actions.

"Reckon you ain't Jim Bryan, after all," he said with a knowing grin.

"Buy yourself a drink," Reck said, and shoving a coin into his hand went outside.

As he worked his way south the stiffness was gradually leaving his neck. The gash in his back pained him occasionally but strength was returning. But when he tried to remember the past, his mind was still blank. His memory, he decided, would return when he reached Apache. Either that or his past would forever be veiled in the mists of the bloody yesterdays. He would learn the truth about himself or Glover's friends would kill him.

There was the gift of luck in his nimble fingers and at Mammoth Camp he won money in a faro game that enabled him to buy a good horse and a Winchester and shells. From Carson City south he had ridden on a freighter, paying for his passage by acting as swamper. But with his own horse he could strike out on his own and make better time.

At night in his blankets, with the stars throwing their silver light across the dark sky, he would think of Ivis Drake. He missed her bright laughter, the gentle touch of her hand. But he was remembering what Glover had said

that night in Tooney's office: "If Reck Corstain turned up alive it might make his widow unhappy. You see, she's fixin' to marry somebody else."

With his coffin handles in his saddle bags, he worked his way down the eastern slope of the Sierras, a tall, sun-browned man who seldom smiled. Never again would life hold anything but bitterness for him. After all, he was Reck Corstain, so they said. He was also in his grave. You could prove it by the headstone in Apache's cemetery.

In the town of Apache, sweltering on the banks of the Colorado, the lynching of Reck Corstain had been all but forgotten. Even the main thoroughfare, wide and dusty and rutted from the wheels of freighters and the hoofs of cowponies had been changed from Corstain Street to Main Street. The rambling Corstain building which housed the mercantile and Bulwar's Saloon had been sold. The new owners had removed the Corstain sign that formerly hung above the mercantile windows.

This day Lothar Trancas came pounding along Main Street, his Broken Wheel riders strung out behind. At his side rode Tay Gillis, foreman of the huge Broken Wheel, seventeen miles east of town.

A spatter of dust filmed Trancas' black coat. He was an imposing figure in the saddle. His flat-crowned black hat was set at a jaunty angle on his head; the lanyard dangled below a squarish chin. His black mustache was freshly trimmed and his crisp black hair was clipped close to his head.

When the men turned in at the hitchrail in front of Bulwar's Saloon, Trancas did not dismount. He jerked his head at the bulky Tay Gillis.

"Keep the boys sober," Trancas warned. "I may need them tonight."

Gillis nodded and swung down. He hitched up his pants around a fat middle and spat tobacco juice on the boardwalk nearly splattering the shoes of two passing women. The women glared, but Gillis only grinned.

Trancas fingered his black mustache. "Watch that sort

of thing, Gillis," he said in his thin voice. "We're going to be a long time in Apache. Stop making a fool of yourself in town."

Gillis looked sullen and one hand slid to the big knife he wore at his belt. Trancas needed Gillis and his brassy nerve. But he did not altogether trust a man who loved to use a knife on a man.

"You're the boss," Gillis said grudgingly and smeared the tobacco juice into the dust of the boardwalk. Knowing the temper of Lothar Trancas, he wanted the subject changed and found a way out by pointing at the far end of the street. "Doc Shanley ain't got rid of that sign like you told him to."

Trancas scowled. "That's the business I was telling you about."

He stared at the small building at the end of the block. Shanley had formerly used part of it for an office. Since the lynching of Reck Corstain he had been treating his patients at his home. Across the top of the building was a sign: *Great Southwestern Rail Road. Sam Corstain, Pres.*

As owner of that building it was Shanley's responsibility to see that the sign was removed. Trancas said, "I want nothing in this town to remind folks that a Corstain ever lived here."

Gillis dropped a hand to his gun. "A few bullets would fix that sign for good."

Trancas swung his horse. "Maybe you and me will convince Doc Shanley he ought to take down that sign. And he'll do it in public with the whole town looking on!"

Trancas spurred his horse into Jefferson Street, where half a dozen fine houses fringed the river. He dismounted in front of the largest house, tied his horse at an elaborate picket fence. Sunlight touched the cupola, flashed on the ironwork of the widow's walk. An evening breeze rustled the poplars and a thick stand of cottonwoods that bordered the big sprawling house. The smell of cool water scented the air.

As Trancas stepped through the gate a huge old dog with grizzled muzzle swung suddenly around the end

of the long porch. Scarred from forgotten battles of his youth, the dog sniffed the air and came to a halt on stiffened forelegs. He bared his fangs, the fur rising on his neck. For a long moment he stood like that, facing Trancas who had come to an abrupt halt.

Carefully Trancas put a hand to the gun beneath his coat. He moved slowly toward the front door with its leaded glass trim.

"Some day," he growled at the dog, "I'll put a bullet in your head."

The huge animal waited until Trancas reached the porch, then trotted along a weed-grown path to the back of the house.

Trancas did not draw an easy breath until the dog was out of sight. Every time he saw the animal he felt a tightening at his throat as if sensing the dog someday would attack.

When the door opened, Zoe Corstain, still in mourning black, took his hat and led the way into the parlor. Trancas sank onto a plush sofa, letting his eyes drift from Zoe's handsome figure to a collection of guns in a glass-enclosed case that covered one entire wall.

"Someday soon," Trancas said through his teeth, "I'll move these Corstain guns to the ranch." He took a cheroot from his cigar case, rolled it between his palms. "You'll like it at the Broken Wheel, Zoe. I'm having a new room built for us—"

He broke off, noticing she was strangely silent this evening. She poured sherry from a decanter into a long-stemmed glass. When she passed the drink to him her tight-fitting black dress made a rustling sound. He hated sherry, but to humor her he drank it. Then he settled back in the luxury of the Corstain mansion, feeling a strange stirring along his nerves. The Corstains had been big in Apache and he had whipped them. He laughed silently, his eyes straying to the mass of blue-black hair atop Zoe's head. He liked her better with her hair hanging waist length. Then she looked as a woman should look,

inviting with open arms. Now she was corseted and her hair was worn in neat coils.

Zoe said, watching his dark face, "I don't care to live at the Broken Wheel."

His eyes turned black in a sudden burst of anger, but he checked his rage. Carefully he set the long-stemmed sherry glass on a polished table top. "You can come to town whenever you like."

"I hate ranch life. I despise dust and animals—"

He said sharply, "If you hate animals why keep that mangy dog around the house?"

She clenched her hands so tightly he could see that her finger tips were bloodless. Zoe said without looking at him, "Reck's only been dead a short time. It wouldn't look right to have his dog shot."

"I'll have some of the boys come in and put him in a sack. You can say he went off someplace and died."

She shook her black head and when he tried to catch her wrist she adroitly moved aside. "Sometimes I think that dog senses what we did to Reck. I think he hates us."

He gave a short laugh, trying to guess what lay behind that beautiful face. She had changed in these few short weeks. When Reck had first been buried they enjoyed their new-found freedom with a recklessness that caused tongues to wag. Now she was worrying about a dog.

Trancas bit down on his cheroot. "Maybe you've still got a feeling for Reck. Is that why you want to keep his dog around?"

She gave him that lazy look, that lift of black brows, the faint curve of her red lips in what was meant to be a mocking smile. "You can never tell about that, Lothar," she said.

He sprang from the sofa, jealousy twisting his mouth. He stood glaring at her a moment and was satisfied to see a shadow of fear touch her eyes. But instantly it was gone. "You're talking in circles," he said. "You don't want to live at the ranch. You want to keep Reck's dog alive. Why?"

She came to him then, putting her hands on his shoul-

ders so that he could feel the warmth of her fingers against his neck. "I'm trying to say that we should wait a while before we marry. At least a year."

He gripped her by the arms so hard that a little cry escaped her lips. "If there's another man, I'll kill him."

"Like you killed Reck?"

"Like *we* killed Reck."

CHAPTER FOUR

SHE SLIPPED from his grasp, adjusting a strand of hair that had tumbled across her forehead. Then she smoothed her black dress over her thighs. "It's customary to wait a year, Lothar."

He saw how pale her lips were, how the color had receded from her cheeks. "You've changed, Zoe," he said, trying to keep his voice calm. "You've changed since the day you got that letter."

Her brows lifted quickly. "What letter?"

"The one postmarked Virginia City."

Anger mingled with the fear in her amber eyes. "You've got nerve to read my mail!" she cried.

He smiled, his small teeth glistening in contrast to the ebony black of his mustache. "I just happened to see the letter at the Mercantile. I didn't read it." He caught her wrist, feeling it cold to his touch. "Who wrote you from Virginia City?"

Suddenly she lifted her hands to his face, pulling down his head and kissing him full on the mouth. Fire ran through him but it could not replace his new suspicion. He felt her breath warm against his neck as she said, "The letter was from an old friend. A woman."

"Let me read it. Then I'll believe you."

He felt her involuntarily stiffen in his arms. "The letter was burned," she told him. Then she put a hand to her forehead. "I have a headache. I must see Doc Shanley tomorrow and get some more powders. Will you leave now, Lothar?"

He dropped his hands to his sides. She had turned

sideways and now he could see the full curve of her breasts in the lamplight. Blood ran thick and hot through his veins. But mention of Doc Shanley's name had given him a new source of anger and suspicion.

"When you go there tomorrow see if you can find out why he's drinking so much."

"He always drank," Zoe said.

"He's been drunk more often—since Reck died."

"He was the only friend the Corstains had," Zoe said quickly. "There's nothing strange about him drinking himself to death when they're all gone."

Lothar Trancas snatched his hat from the table. "I've got a feeling about him," he said from the door. "And about you. We're going to be married as planned. You understand that, Zoe?"

Her amber eyes glared at him. "A woman has a right—"

He gave her an ugly smile. "If you figure to play your separate game, forget it. You own fifty-one percent of the stock in the Great Southwestern Rail Road, *Mrs. Corstain!*"

"I thought you wanted to marry me for myself."

"So I do. But I also want that stock. I'll get it—one way or another!"

When he had gone, she stood for a moment in the center of the great parlor. A fire burning in the hearth spat a spark across the bare floor. Angrily she stamped it out with her foot. In a sudden burst of anger she flung the decanter of sherry against the wall. She watched the spreading stain on the fine wall paper that old Sam Corstain had brought from Europe so many years before. Then, gathering her skirts, she ran nimbly up the winding stairway to her bedroom. There, she took a letter from her bureau drawer, considered a moment and emptied half a box of face powder into a slop jar. Carefully she folded the letter, put it in the powder box and replaced the lid. Then she sat down before a huge mirror and smiled at her reflection.

Trancas was in a foul mood by the time he routed Tay

Gillis out of Bulwar's Saloon and led his foreman to the far end of town where Doc Shanley's cottage was a dim white square in the moonlight. A light burned in the window and Trancas grunted in satisfaction. The two men dismounted and went up the walk. Doc Shanley's moon face paled when he saw Trancas and the bulky, red-haired Gillis.

Without ceremony, the two men shoved their way into the cottage and kicked the door shut behind them. Trancas sniffed at the smell of disinfectant that lay heavy in the air.

"You alone?" Trancas asked.

Doc Shanley nodded, but Gillis quickly searched the house, poking his head into the bedroom Shanley had reserved for his patients. "He's alone," Gillis announced and shifted a quill toothpick around in his mouth. His small eyes glittered in anticipation.

Doc Shanley's small, dumpy figure visibly trembled. "I know why you're here," he said, a trace of bluster in his voice. "I'll tend to taking the railroad sign off my building. But I'll do it in my own good time."

Trancas laughed. "I never said anything about that sign."

Doc Shanley peered at him, seeing the dark face, the eyes; usually a reddish brown they were now jet black from some hidden anger. "You don't like having that one last reminder that a Corstain built this town."

Trancas gripped him hard by the arm so that a flicker of pain crossed the doctor's plump face. "You been drinking more than is good for you, Doc. Why?"

Doc Shanley licked his lips. "I haven't seen old Sam Corstain or heard from him. Is that what's worrying you?"

Trancas tightened his grip and slapped the doctor across the mouth. A worm of blood trickled across his chin.

"Sam Corstain is the least of my worries," Trancas snarled. "He's probably dead down in Mexico. Even if he's still alive, he's blind." He waited a moment, watch-

ing the doctor's eyes. "It's Reck Corstain I'm interested in."

Doc Shanley stiffened and his mouth trembled. He looked pale and old in the lamplight. And scared. "Reck is dead—"

Gillis moved with lightning speed. He backhanded the small doctor across the nose. Blood spurted across Doc Shanley's shirt and he staggered back from the blow. As he was bent over, holding his nose, Tay Gillis kicked him in the groin. Doc Shanley lay on the floor, whimpering, his knees drawn up to his belly. Gillis drew his knife, holding it so that lamplight ran down the blade.

"I'll finish him now, Trancas."

Trancas put out a hand holding Gillis, but his eyes were on Doc Shanley, writhing on the floor. "You always sided the Corstains, Doc. I hear you were sweet-talking old Sam Corstain's wife when they first hit this country. But when Reck and the other kids came along, you lost out. She decided to stick with old Sam—"

"Don't put your filthy mouth to Martha Corstain's name!" Doc Shanley cried, and Gillis kicked him hard in the side, knocking him against the table that held the lamp. Shanley lay huddled on the floor, staring in fascination at the knife the Broken Wheel foreman held in his big, hair-backed hand. "Get it over with," Doc Shanley said through clenched teeth.

Gillis, at a nod from Trancas, yanked him to his feet. They pushed him into a chair and gave him a towel. Still moaning, Doc Shanley wiped the blood off his face.

"May I have a drink," he said, and without waiting for a reply, fumbled in the table drawer.

Gillis yelped a warning as Shanley's fingers closed over the butt of a short-barreled revolver. Trancas slammed a shoulder against the doctor, knocked him off the chair to the floor. The gun clattered into a corner.

"Get a shovel," Trancas told Tay Gillis. Then with his eyes murderous, he glared at the doctor. "If my hunch is right, you won't ever have to worry about drinking yourself to death."

The town cemetery lay in ghostly silence on the crest of a hill some two miles from Apache. Three men slipped from their horses, climbed a picket fence and moved carefully among the headboards. The moon had come up over the Duarte Hills, flooding the range with a silver glow. A lantern threw jagged patches of gold across the gravestones. Tay Gillis carried the lantern, he also carried a gun. Before a headboard marked *Reckland Corstain*, they halted.

"You take first trick with the shovel, Doc," Trancas said through his teeth. "It ought to sweat some of the whisky out of you."

Doc Shanley took the shovel from Trancas. He stood there in the faint light, a pathetic figure. "Shoot me now," he said. "What in hell are you waiting for?"

"Start digging," Trancas ordered.

After fifteen minutes of work with the shovel, Doc Shanley was exhausted. He sank down on the mound of dirt he had shoveled from the hole in the ground, holding his head in his hands.

Gillis took over, complaining at the night heat, the hard work. "You should have brought some of the boys," the foreman grunted.

Trancas said, "Nobody but the three of us is going to get a look at Reck Corstain's coffin." He looked across at Doc Shanley, who now stood, staring in fascination at that widening hole. "Take it easy, Doc," Trancas drawled. "If Reck Corstain is in that coffin, you got nothing to worry about. If he isn't, I'm going to kill you."

A quarter of an hour later Gillis had widened the hole sufficiently so that a coffin lid was exposed to the lantern light. Using the shovel blade, Gillis pried up the lid and held his nose at the stench. Trancas lifted the lantern high and stepped forward to peer down into the coffin. What he saw was not pretty. It was a man, you could tell that. There was very little else you could tell.

"Worms got working on this one pretty early," Tay Gillis said.

"Those are Corstain's clothes, all right," Trancas mused.

"I remember what he was wearing that day. But the face—"

"Who can see a face," Gillis said. "He's been in the ground too long." When Trancas continued to stare into the coffin, Gillis said, "You figure maybe that ain't Corstain in there?"

Trancas said, "This man is Corstain's build."

Doc Shanley, staring at the hard faces of Trancas and Gillis, said, "Of course it's Reck Corstain. Who else could it be?"

Trancas glanced at the doctor, frowning thoughtfully. After a moment, he said, "Cover it up. I'm satisfied."

On the way back to town, Trancas said, "You're lucky to be alive, Doc. But it'll only be temporary if you don't get that sign down off your building. Every time I see the name of Corstain I get a pain in my gut."

When the two men left him at his cottage, Doc Shanley silently cursed them. He went into the house, touching a match to a lamp wick. He felt tired and the blow at his groin had sickened him. He had nothing to live for, yet the prospect of Tay Gillis cutting him to pieces with his knife had been completely unnerving. With a shaking hand he found a bottle in his table drawer and took a long drink. He was corking the bottle when he heard the creak of a board in the kitchen. He stiffened, feeling cold in his stomach, wondering if Trancas had sent his foreman back to finish the job after all.

Quickly he picked the fallen revolver from the floor where Gillis had knocked it. He was standing like that when he saw the figure in the kitchen doorway.

A tall man, he was, with features burned black by the sun. A man with metal gray eyes and a wide mouth beneath a nose that had once been broken. Doc Shanley whistled softly and picked up the lamp and held it high so that the light fell across the hard planes of the man's face.

The man said, "Don't you know me, Doc?"

Doc Shanley muttered, "Reck. Reck Corstain."

Doc Shanley pulled curtains over the windows, bolted the doors. Then he sank wearily into a chair and took another drink from his bottle. "Where are your men, Reck?" he said, wiping his lips on his coat sleeve.

"I came alone."

Doc Shanley stared. "*You?* Came in town—alone?"

A cold smile touched Reck's lips. He swung a chair around and straddled it, his gun angling out from a lean hip where he could reach it quickly. "Guess I shouldn't be surprised you talking like that," he said softly. "They tell me I used to be a coward."

Doc Shanley was peering up at the tall man. "Yes, it's really you," he said. "The face is different somehow, but that must be from the suffering. They treated you badly, Reck."

Reck put a hand to his brown throat. "For a long time I figured my neck would be stiff for the rest of my days. But somewhere inside I must have been tough. What happened to me brought the toughness to the surface." He put a hand on the doctor's arm. "You saved my life. How did you manage it?"

With a trembling hand Doc Shanley whittled tobacco from a plug into the bowl of an old pipe. When he got the pipe going, he said, "I still don't know how you survived. I wasn't at the house when it happened. Trancas caught you in your own yard and after Gillis and his men had beaten you nearly to death, they put a rope around your neck and made you stand on a barrel alongside your own shed. They tied the rope to the end of a beam flush with the shed wall. Then they kicked out the barrel and let you hang." The doctor puffed thoughtfully on his pipe. "It was pitch dark or they might have noticed."

"Noticed what, Doc?"

"That the sharp end of a spike protruded from the shed wall. It caught you in the back and left just enough slack in the rope so you didn't strangle. Glover was there and said you were already dead when they hanged you. They cut you down and Glover brought out a coffin. They left

you in the parlor. That's when I came out and got you."

"Why did you help me, Doc?"

"A lot of reasons. Memory of your mother was the most important."

"I take it," Reck said with a grim smile, "that you didn't care much for me."

Doc Shanley puffed a screen of blue smoke up around his eyes so Reck could not see his expression. "Luckily a puncher about your build had been crushed by a horse. I dressed him in your clothes and put him in your coffin. I had heard Mrs. Corstain say the coffin wasn't to be opened, so I knew I had a chance—a slim chance." He took a deep breath. "I prayed nobody would open the coffin. I was in luck because the puncher had no relatives and I spread the word that he was pretty badly crushed and that it wouldn't be pleasant to see him in his coffin. It wasn't a lie because he was badly mangled."

"That's doing a hell of a lot for a man you didn't like."

Shanley shrugged. "All you had were your silver coffin handles. I painted those black so no one would think they had any value. Then I paid two Mexicans to take you upriver. I had saved the life of one of their wives when she had her last child. He was anxious to repay me with this favor."

Reck clenched his hands when he told Doc Shanley of regaining consciousness in the wagon belonging to Seawright's theatrical troupe.

"I first had an idea who I might be when I overheard Glover talking about me. He said you were the only friend of the Corstains in Apache. I didn't have much trouble finding your house."

"What did Glover say?"

"He didn't talk much," Reck said through tight lips. "I had to kill him."

Doc Shanley stared. "How many men helped you kill him?"

Reck felt blood rush to his cheeks. "Three of them tried to put a bullet in me. I killed Glover and a red-haired man. The third one begged off by lifting his hands."

Doc Shanley looked startled. "Maybe there's good blood left in the Corstains, after all." He slapped his knee with the flat of his hand. "Go to your father. Tonight." He paced the small room. "Sam Corstain is hiding at the old adobe."

"You'll have to guide me, Doc."

Doc Shanley frowned. "Are you trying to tell me you don't remember the adobe? After all the times you've ridden there?"

"I remember nothing before the day I woke up in Seawright's wagon."

The doctor let the breath whistle from between tightened lips. "Come here, lad. Let me have a look at you."

He rolled up his sleeves, beckoned Reck onto a long table. Very carefully Doc Shanley probed Reck's skull with his fingers. Then, as if satisfied, he stepped back. "Such things aren't uncommon," he said, as if to himself. "They beat you unmercifully. A blow on the head could have destroyed your memory." He put a hand on Reck's shoulder. "In a way all this should make you thankful. It has given you a new spirit."

When Reck removed his shirt, Doc Shanley stared at the great ugly gash in his back.

Shanley touched the scar with his finger. "Find the spike that pinned you to the shed wall and keep it for luck. You owe your life to that rusty piece of iron." While Reck put on his shirt, Doc Shanley said, "It's truly unbelievable that a man could stand so much and be alive to talk about it."

Reck fashioned a cigarette with strong brown fingers. "Ride with me to the adobe."

Shanley said, "Your father would likely shoot me on sight. He's changed since your mother died. A veritable devil."

Shanley hastily found paper and pencil and drew a rough map. "Memorize it and then destroy it. No man knows your father's hideout except a chosen few."

"How long since you've seen him?"

"Last month. He fell and hurt his leg. I'm good enough

to have around when he's in pain." Doc Shanley laughed bitterly. Then he straightened. "You'll be a real son to the old fool this time, Reck. I hope he appreciates it."

Reck Corstain touched the doctor's bloodied shirt front. "Who did that to you, Doc?"

"Trancas and Tay Gillis."

"I'll remember those names," Reck said thinly.

"And another name. Jube Canavan. He hates any Corstain and he'll shoot you in the back if he gets a chance. A sneaking horsethief that your father sent to Yuma prison for five years. He's never forgotten it."

"Jube Canavan," Reck said. "I'll remember." At the door he said, "Seems that I have a wife. Maybe I ought to go and see if she's kept the bed warm for me."

Doc Shanley's mouth tightened. "The only thing that will change you back to the man you were is Zoe. Let Trancas have her. She's no good, Reck."

Reck's eyes darkened. "Good or bad, she's my wife. I don't intend to share her with another. And, besides, Trancas can't make love if he's dead."

"He's a tough man, Reck."

"So am I."

CHAPTER FIVE

JUBE CANAVAN usually stayed well beyond the town limits of Apache, but this night he had come down from his outlaw camp deep in the Duarte Hills to see Lothar Trancas. Tall and stooped, Jube Canavan had a horse face and a mean eye. He moved furtively in the shadows for there were half a dozen ranchers in the basin who would hang him if they caught sight of him alone. Joe Branler of the JB had almost caught him last week when he and the boys made off with half-a-dozen head of the prize Morgans, Branler raised. Art Henshaw of the Spur and Grady Jones of the Rail 7 had put a price on his head. It made Jube Canavan feel important that he should be the subject of such rancor. But in his association with Trancas he felt secure. No matter who might move

against him, he had Trancas and the Broken Wheel to back him up.

It was being in town alone that was the danger. But he had seen Trancas and Tay Gillis riding along the road from the cemetery with Doc Shanley. He wondered what they had been up to out there at the graveyard this time of night. But he wasn't too much interested. What he wanted now was money. Trancas hadn't paid him in two months.

A block from Doc Shanley's house, Canavan suddenly edged his gray in from an alley, setting the mount squarely in the center of the road. Trancas pulled up his horse and Gillis started to move a hand to his gun.

"It's me—Canavan."

In the moonlight, Canavan looked like a humped old slab of oak in the saddle. He was only thirty but five years in Yuma Prison had left its mark on him.

"You in town alone?" Trancas asked, letting his reddish brown eyes shift to the alley entrance.

"The boys are waitin' for me outa town," Canavan said in his harsh voice. "Figured there was less chance of us bein' spotted if I come in alone."

"What do you want?" Trancas asked, and rolled a cigarette, hooking a leg over the saddle horn.

"Thought you'd be ridin' out to look over the hosses I got for you. Some prime stock. Best ones Joe Branler has got."

Trancas sighed. He jerked his head at Gillis and the bulky foreman dismounted. Trancas slid to the ground and moved to the alley. Gillis followed him. Puzzled, Canavan stared at them a moment, then reading no treachery in their actions, dismounted and joined them.

Trancas said, "I've been figuring to ride out and see you." He jingled some gold coins in his right hand. These he dumped into Canavan's open palm.

Canavan could tell by the feel of the coins that there were four double eagles in his hand. He felt a rush of savage anger. "This ain't five hundred dollars."

"No, it isn't," Trancas agreed. "It's a final payment."

Canavan glared at the two men in the darkness, trying to see their faces. "You better tell the straight of it," Canavan said.

Trancas said, "Our deal was good as long as the Corstains were a threat to me. Now they're through. Reck is dead. Old Sam won't dare show his face this side of the border."

Jube Canavan scraped a thumbnail along his stubbly jaw. For a moment he regarded them silently, then he said, "As long as Sam Corstain draws a breath, I'll be after him. You oughta know that. A man don't forget five years in Yuma that easy."

"That's your own business," Trancas said. "But I'm serving notice on you now. I won't back you up if there's trouble."

Jube Canavan laughed thinly. "You hire me and the boys to rustle hosses. Make it look like Sam Corstain is building himself up a crew in Mexico. You want everybody scared. Want 'em to think Sam Corstain is goin' to come ridin' down some night with a torch in one hand and a gun in the other. I run the risk of gettin' my neck in a sling. Sure, the money is good. You buy all the hosses we can steal. Sell 'em in Mexico. Nice little sideline for you. Now you're tellin' me the deal's off."

Trancas said, "Now that the thing is settled, you better pull your crew out of the hills."

Jube Canavan's voice rose shrilly. "Nobody tells me what to do. I'm stayin' in this country, Trancas!"

Lothar Trancas laughed. One minute he was standing there, relaxed, a cigarette hanging from one corner of his mouth. The next instant he leaped on Canavan, pinning the man's arms to his sides. "Get his gun, Gillis!" Trancas yelled.

Dust boiled up around their faces as Canavan tried to wrestle himself free of Trancas' powerful hold. Gillis snaked in a big hand, yanked Canavan's gun from its holster and threw it into the darkness where it thudded against a shed wall.

Only then did Trancas step back.

"God damn you!" Canavan cried.

"I don't want any shooting if it can be avoided," Trancas told him bluntly. "But keep your tongue in your head or I'll kill you where you stand. Now clear out. Take your crew and head north or south. Anywhere. But get out of Apache. If I catch you again, I'll hang you!"

Jube Canavan wiped a torn shirtsleeve across his mouth. "Looks like I got two scores to settle. Sam Corstain and—you."

He had turned away to get his horse when Tay Gillis uttered a growl and sprang on him. Thin moonlight flashed on the naked blade of a silver-handled knife. Canavan, aware of sudden danger, half-turned. He threw up an arm across his face, but not soon enough. The knife point caught him at the right temple, cut downward to a corner of his mouth. Blood spurted across his cheek. He crouched, moaning softly, blood seeping through the fingers of the hand he clapped to his face.

For a moment the outlaw stood hunched over, while Gillis waited with knife poised. Then, without a sound, he turned to his horse. He pulled himself into the saddle with difficulty.

"You better let me finish him off," Gillis whispered. "One thing about a knife. It don't make any noise."

Trancas shook his head. Loud enough so Canavan could hear, he said, "If you catch him or any of his men in the hills—hang 'em!"

They stood watching Canavan move off into the darkness. After a moment Gillis wiped his knife blade on some dried weeds, returned it to his belt. "You're makin' a mistake, lettin' him go like that."

Trancas said, "I don't make mistakes, Gillis. Remember that. We might have use for Canavan, after all. I like to keep my hole card covered."

Instead of going directly to the adobe below the border, Reck hid out in the hills, contemplating his next move with care. He wanted more background before he acted, so the following night he again visited Doc Shanley.

"I want to hear everything about the Corstains," he said, "and why they're in the mess they are today. Start from the beginning, Doc."

Over a bottle, Doc Shanley told him the story.

Years before, old Sam Corstain had brought his bride and a few scrubby cows up from Texas. Seventeen miles east of the site of Apache, one of the wheels on his covered wagon splintered against a rock. That decided Sam Corstain; he would settle in the valley. Because of the mishap that had decided his future here, Sam Corstain called his ranch the Broken Wheel. From the first, Corstain prospered, ruling the valley with gun and hang noose. He had money and three sons.

"Fifteen years ago your two older brothers died when smallpox hit Apache," Doc Shanley said. "Sam never was the same since Bill and Henry were buried. Then four years ago Martha—your mother—died."

Reck stared at the moon face, seeing the sadness in the old doctor's eyes. It was strange, knowing the old doctor had worshipped Martha Corstain all those years. Yet Reck could remember none of it.

"Soon after your mother died," Shanley went on, after taking a drink from his bottle, "Sam Corstain was blinded when a dynamite charge went off too soon. He was mining for silver when it happened. After that, he made you the boss."

"What about my wife?"

"Two years ago you married Zoe Taylor. It was about the time that Trancas first showed up here." Doc Shanley looked down at his clenched hands. "It—it was common gossip about your wife and Trancas."

Reck nodded. "I overheard Glover practically admit it."

Doc Shanley paced the small room. "Zoe and Trancas figured to get you out of the way. When Sam Corstain formed the Great Southwestern Rail Road, he browbeat the other ranchers and folks in town to put up forty thousand dollars for stock. Sam figured to build a narrow gauge line to connect with the Nevada Central. But nobody ever saw a share of that stock."

Reck smoked thoughtfully. "No wonder the Corstains are hated like they are."

Doc Shanley nodded. "Folks brought in a lawyer named Peter Lawson to look into the matter." The doctor's face looked pained. "You're supposed to have shot him, Reck. That was the excuse Trancas needed to have you lynched."

Reck's face darkened. "Did I kill Lawson?"

Doc Shanley shrugged. "I'd be inclined to say it was either Trancas or Tay Gillis."

Reck rose from the table where he had been sitting. "My first job," he said grimly, "is to prove I didn't murder Lawson."

"You'll have to do that, Reck. Or Sheriff Mendon will hang you legally."

Reck said, "I don't fancy having a rope around my neck again. It's damned uncomfortable, Doc." He touched the old doctor on the arm. "I want you to point out Trancas and Gillis and anybody else I ought to know in this town—including my wife."

For two nights Doc Shanley hid in the shadows of an alley beside Bulwar's Saloon with Reck, whispering when a rider came down the street, "There's Trancas," or "The big one is Gillis."

But Zoe Corstain had not appeared. Evidently she was secluded in the big Corstain house and had no intention of mingling with the townspeople. After all, there was such a thing as a period of mourning. Doc Shanley gave a short laugh when he said that.

The second night, after Doc Shanley had returned to his cottage, Reck took up a position beside a two-story frame building with rose-colored drapes that showed red with the glow of lamplight behind them. He was patient. An hour before he had seen Gillis stagger out of Bulwar's and reel up the alley to this house. Reck, following him at a safe distance, watched a blonde girl open the door, put an arm around the Broken Wheel foreman's

waist and lead him inside. Reck listened to their laughter when the door closed.

It seemed strange standing here. He wondered if in that other life of his he had also been met at the door of this place as Gillis had been met. His ears burned when he thought of how Glover had talked about him. John P. Glover, the little man with the bowler hat now buried in Virginia City. A little man who had made the mistake of reaching for a gun beneath his coat.

Even Doc Shanley had little use for me then, Reck thought. *I must have changed considerable for him to want to help me now.*

As he waited there in the darkness, wanting to smoke but not daring to strike a match, he thought of Ivis Drake. He could close his eyes and see her image, her dark blue eyes, the mass of coppery hair. Odd, he reflected that he could see her so clearly in his mind's eye, see her curved figure, remember the touch of her hand on his own. Yet beyond the day he awakened in Seawright's wagon his mind was empty. It frightened him in a sense to be in a town he had been born in, to see people who had known him and yet not remember any of it.

The door of the building opened and Reck caught a glimpse of the blonde girl and saw her give Gillis a pat on the shoulder. Gillis seemed to have sobered somewhat for his gait was steadier. Reck let him get his horse where it was tied behind Bulwar's Saloon. Then Reck got his own horse. Gillis rode slowly in what was the direction of the Broken Wheel ranch. Doc Shanley had patiently given Reck the lay of the land so that at least he could move about with a reasonable sense of direction.

Gillis rode slowly, singing snatches of a trail song. Reck, as he followed at a safe distance, felt a revulsion for the man, recalling the stories Doc Shanley had told. A man who would rather use a knife than a gun.

Clouds banked up behind the Sabers, forming a solid wall of black in the distance. They had not yet reached the moon. Silver light touched the sage. To the left a

sahuaro cactus made a slanted shadow along the ground that reminded Reck of a drunken old giant.

Where the road cut through a rocky wall and the shadows lay black as a stormy midnight, Reck made his play. He was downwind from Gillis' mount, and the rocky trail brought out the clank of shod hoofs on a hard surface so he was able to move forward without detection. He was twenty feet away, coming fast, when he threw his loop. At the last moment Gillis, still half drunk, had sensed approaching danger and tried to twist sideways in the saddle. The loop caught him squarely below the shoulders, pinning his arms to his sides. Reck yanked hard on the rope and Gillis tumbled backward out of the saddle.

When he dazedly got to his knees, Reck was standing over him, a gun in his hand. Still holding the rope, Reck plucked Gillis' weapon from its holster and threw it into the brush.

"What the hell's the idea?" Gillis cried.

Reck punched him in the back with the gun, moved the rope up to his neck. "On your horse, Gillis," he ordered. "We're taking a ride."

Gillis tried to peer at the shadowy face above him, but in the darkness, features were indistinct. "I'll cut you into forty pieces for this," the foreman growled.

But there was an edge of fear in his voice. He got to his horse and with Reck holding the gun on him, he started riding. "Try and make a break," Reck warned, "and you'll snap your neck." For emphasis he yanked hard on the rope and Gillis jerked in the saddle.

"You're chokin' me," he cried, and clawed at the noose.

Reck had mounted and now he spurred close. "Keep moving," he said. "Straight ahead."

Silently the two men rode, the captive and the captor. The walls fell away and they entered a flat country. Beyond a ridge of hills was the smell of fresh water and a clump of cottonwoods, their branches rustling in the night breeze. This, Reck decided, must be Allaro Creek.

He forced Gillis to dismount. Then, holding the rope

with one hand, the gun with the other, he backed the foreman against one of the cottonwoods, made several turns with the rope and bound him securely.

Gillis had not uttered a word since they had dismounted. A true braggart, Doc Shanley had said. A coward at heart.

Reck stepped close, struck a match and held it so that the feeble glow washed over the leather-brown length of his face, bringing out the hard metal gray of his eyes.

"Corstain!" Gillis screamed. "Reck Corstain!"

Stark terror widened his eyes and his mouth hung open as he stared at this man he thought he had seen lying in his grave at the cemetery. In sudden panic he lunged against the ropes, but they held him fast.

Reck said, "You and me are going to talk."

For a long moment Gillis was silent. Some of the fear edged from his voice when he said, "I don't figure how you're alive or why. But you ain't no ghost. If you got any sense you'll cut me loose and head for Mexico while you got the chance. Trancas will kill you deader'n hell if you don't."

"He tried once," Reck reminded him.

He reached around behind the bound Gillis, found the knife at his belt and removed it. As his arm brushed against the foreman, he felt the man tremble.

"What you goin' to do with that?" Gillis wailed. When Reck made no reply, Gillis said, "I got money hid out. Take it and cut me loose."

"Not even a million dollars will save you."

The big man stiffened. "Then you ain't Reck Corstain," he said. "There wasn't anything Reck wouldn't do for a dollar."

"Maybe I've changed," Reck said bitterly, again reminded of the type of man he used to be. He pushed the point of the knife against Gillis' belly. "I hear that Trancas bought the Corstain ranch for five hundred dollars at a sheriff's sale."

"Sure he did," Gillis snapped, trying to bluster.

"There were no Corstains around to protest. And nobody else had nerve enough to bid against Trancas."

"The Corstains are through around here."

Reck shook his head. "The Corstains will get back the Broken Wheel and change the name of Main Street back to Corstain Street. We'll put the Corstain sign back on the Corstain Building that Trancas bought."

Gillis snarled, "Is that before or after the sheriff hangs you for killin' Peter Lawson?"

Reck made a cutting motion with the knife. "Ever wonder how it feels to have a knife cut into you? I hear you like to watch a man squirm and see the blood run. Wonder how it'll look on you."

Gillis lost his new-found nerve. "Wait, Reck," he pleaded. "You Corstains have got Injun blood in you. But don't use Apache tricks on me—"

Reck ran a thumb along the knife blade. "Who killed Peter Lawson?"

"You did," Gillis said weakly.

In the moonlight, Reck's face hardened. As he watched the slobbering big man lashed to the tree he listened for possible sounds on the road, twenty yards to his left. But the only sound was the sigh of the night wind through the cottonwoods. Above, the moon hung like a silver lamp in the starry sky.

Reck said, "I'll ask once more. Who killed Lawson?"

Gillis stared in fascination at the knife blade a moment. Then he raised his tortured gaze to Reck's hard face. "If I tell Trancas will—"

Reck smiled grimly. "I figured it was either you or Trancas that shot him."

"You'll have a time proving it," Gillis cried, a shred of his old bravado making a last futile attempt to push aside his fear.

Reck's hand flashed. There was the sound of ripping cloth as the fingers of his left hand tore open the front of Gillis' shirt.

"Listen, Reck—" The foreman shivered and sweat

sprang suddenly across his forehead, shining wetly in the moonlight.

"You claim the Corstains are part Indian. If you don't talk I'll use the worst part on you."

The foreman's breathing was heavy. He struggled against the ropes while the point of the knife pressed against his bared belly. A drop of sweat dropped to the knife blade.

"No! No!" Gillis screamed.

"Tell me, damn it!" Reck jabbed harder with the knife.

Gillis cried, "What happens if I tell?"

Reck smiled inwardly. "I'll take you to jail. You'll tell the story in front of Sheriff Mendon. The law can deal with you. Clearing myself of killing Lawson is the first step on the trail back."

On the road there was the sudden clatter of hoofbeats. Reck stiffened, dropping the knife. He put a hand to his gun, cocking his head at the sounds. From the way the horses were moving he figured they were loose. Somebody was moving a bunch of horses in the dark of the moon.

CHAPTER SIX

GILLIS ALSO had heard the sounds of the horses. Now he strained against the ropes, yelling, "Broken Wheel! Broken Wheel!"

Reck slapped him hard across the face, rammed the gun muzzle against his belly. "Shut up!" he warned.

The horses had stopped. Now he heard the low murmur of voices and the sounds of men moving through the brush.

A man's thin voice edged in from the cottonwoods. A voice Reck did not remember.

"Tay Gillis," the voice mocked. "Yellin' for help. Sounds like a snake's got you by the seat of the pants. Ain't that a hell of a note, Lou?"

From the darkness to the left another man said, "Here's

a chance to pay back the sunuvabitch for cuttin' your face all to hell, Jube."

Gillis muttered, "Jube Canavan."

Reck swung away from the bound forman, his gun leveled on those sounds in the brush. From the noise they made he figured there were at least half-a-dozen men out there. He felt the hair stiffen at the back of his neck.

Jube Canavan said, "Who's that with you, Gillis?"

For a moment Gillis hesitated, then as if sensing a way out, he said, "You let me go, Jube, and I'll give you Reck Corstain. You hate the Corstains worse'n poison—"

Jube Canavan chuckled. "You must've been down to see that blonde Daisy Byrd again. Hell, she always sets you to talkin' wild." His voice hardened. "Reck Corstain is dead. What you tryin' to hand me?"

Gillis said, "It's true, Jube. Let's forget everything and you take Corstain—"

Jube Canavan laughed again, unpleasantly. "Sure, we'll forget everything. If you got a new face in your pocket, I'll put it on. I sure as hell don't look good with the one I got."

The men started moving in. Now Reck could see them. Four men stood revealed now at the edge of the cottonwoods. Doc Shanley had told him about Canavan's crew. The tall, stooped man was Jube Canavan. The fat one to his left was probably Lou Talisman, his right hand. A tough and deadly bunch who mixed horse rustling with plain murder.

Jube Canavan held a rifle loosely in his hands. "Good night pickin's," he said. "We get some more of Joe Branler's prize Morgans. On top of that we get Tay Gillis." He was peering hard, trying to see Reck who stood in a blot of shadow thrown out by the cottonwood where Gillis was tied. "Too bad, stranger, but you're in it too."

Reck waited, feeling the tension leave his big body. He marveled that he showed no fear. Glover had said he was a coward. That was what a blow on the head could do to a man. His horse was ten yards to the right, moving

restlessly with its trailed reins, as if sensing the approaching danger.

It was a bad night for shooting. Canavan's crew were dim targets. There was the chance that some of the others had come up from behind and had him boxed. But so far as accuracy was concerned the odds were even. They were bad targets, but so was he.

In this trick to force Gillis to talk, Reck had considered the danger of running into some of the Broken Wheel bunch. He had not figured on Jube Canavan rustling horses this night and spoiling his rendezvous.

A wind had come up, swirling a spiral of dust at his feet. Clouds moved in from the Sabers, drawing a dark curtain across the sky. But their edge had not yet reached the moon. Reck swore softly. He would have to pass a patch of silver light to reach his horse. He considered his chances. Evidently Canavan had not seen the gun in his hand; he was thankful for this one protecting blob of shadow.

Reck said, "I've got a gun lined on your belly, Canavan. Cut loose with that rifle and you'll be kicking your heels on the ground."

Canavan laughed. "And you'll be dead."

"So will you. Either I ride out of here or we both die."

Jube Canavan had stiffened. Now he said, a trace of wonder in his voice, "By hell you sound something like Reck Corstain, at that."

Gillis cried, "I told you he was."

Then Jube Canavan said, "Reck Corstain didn't have the guts of a worm. If it really was him he'd be on his knees, beggin' me to spare his life."

In that instant while Jube Canavan was unsure, trying to edge around so he could see this man in the darkness, Reck made his play. Suddenly he leaped for his horse. A rifle opened up from the left, throwing a bright spot of flame at him. He felt the *whish* of the bullet as it cut across the tops of his shoulders. Another gun slammed. He saw his horse rear. One hand was on the horn when he turned, firing twice. He shot instinctively, without

seeming to aim. He saw Lou Talisman take a lurching step. The man stumbled against Jube Canavan, throwing the rustler off balance so that he shot a hole in the sky instead of in Reck's head.

In the confusion the loose horses on the road stampeded. The men who had been holding them yelled, tried to turn the thundering mounts. Terrified, the horses cut directly across the clearing and Jube Canavan had to leap aside. As Reck gained the saddle he saw Lou Talisman try to rise off the ground. The fat outlaw got his hands under him. A Morgan stallion swerved. Hoofs flashed and Talisman screamed as the big horse knocked him spinning into the brush.

A half dozen rifle shots came winging after the fleeing Reck, but Canavan's crew were shooting wildly. He heard the men curse, heard Gillis scream. It was justice, Reck sensed, if Canavan settled his score with the big Broken Wheel foreman. If Gillis had used a knife on Canavan, Gillis would pay for it. But it also ruined Reck's plans. There was no chance to rescue Gillis and take him to the sheriff. Not now. Because Canavan's crew would cut him to pieces. It had been pure luck that he escaped with a whole skin. In the distance the lights of Apache glowed softly. He headed that way.

Even though it was late, a lamp burned in Doc Shanley's window. Reck tied his horse in the back yard and rapped lightly on the door. Shanley unhooked the screen door. When he saw who it was, he shoved a revolver into his coat pocket.

"You expecting trouble, Doc?" Reck asked, nodding at the pocket that held the gun.

"Gillis might come back."

"I doubt it."

Doc Shanley stared at this tall, grim-faced man. "You've killed him?"

Reck shook his head. While Shanley filled two shot glasses, Reck told of capturing Gillis and how Canavan probably had him now.

"Without Gillis' testimony, there's little chance of clearing myself of that Lawson thing."

They drank and when Shanley had put away the glasses and the bottle, he said, "I've come to like you, Reck. You tried to do it the right way. Take Gillis into court. But the deck is stacked. Adversity has made a man of you and I don't want to see you die—again."

"Once is enough," Reck said with a short laugh.

"I hate to say the fight is hopeless, but it is. Go to the adobe, find your father and take him deeper into Mexico. Down there perhaps you'll find peace. Forget the railroad and forget Apache."

A sudden commotion in the yard caused Reck to stiffen. With one swift motion he blew out the lamp and drew his gun. Outside a man suddenly screamed horribly. Reck felt his nerves crawl. With Doc Shanley at his elbow he peered out the back door. Lantern light revealed a group of men. They seemed to be carrying a man in the folds of a blanket slung between them.

"Doc!" a man yelled. "Open up."

Doc Shanley glanced obliquely at Reck, then opened the screen door. "Who've you got out there?" he shouted at the advancing crowd.

"Tay Gillis! He's been scalped!"

Reck gave a start. He saw the bobbing lanterns in the yard, the silhouettes of twenty or more men angling across the weed-grown lot behind the doctor's house. Doc Shanley nodded toward a closet. Drawing his gun, Reck stepped inside, left the door open a crack. As the men staggered past the closet door Reck caught a glimpse of the man carried in the blanket. It was Gillis, all right; the top of his head was raw and bleeding.

Doc Shanley's voice paled in the lamplight. "Put him on the table," he ordered brusquely. A heavy-set man with a paunch—Joe Branler—had entered with the others. Doc Shanley said, "What happened, Branler?"

"Somebody got away with a bunch of my Morgans tonight," the owner of the big JB ranch said bitterly. "We

started after 'em. At Bone Creek we heard shooting and rode that way. Them rustlers left the horses and lit out when they heard us."

A lank man with a prominent Adam's apple said, "When we rode up we found Gillis tied to a tree with the top of his head missing." Dave Quimby was his name and he rodded the JB for Branler. "I'd sure as hell think the 'Paches was loose again," Quimby added, "if I didn't know better."

Doc Shanley had told one of the men to heat water. Now the doctor was stripping off Gillis' bloody shirt.

Branler said, "Think you can save him, Doc?"

"It's a wonder he's lived this long," said Doc Shanley, rolling up his sleeves. "I'll do what I can for him."

When the doctor began to probe that wounded head Gillis suddenly screamed, returning to consciousness. He sat up on the table his eyes staring. "Corstain! Corstain!" His screams died to a whisper. He fell back to the table, his hands hanging limply over the edge.

The men exchanged startled glances, then crowded forward. Doc Shanley felt for a pulse.

Brown-bearded Joe Branler looked angry. "He was yelling Corstain's name when we found him."

"He won't yell anymore," Doc Shanley said, pushing down his sleeves. "Gillis is dead."

Reck watched Joe Branler run a hand over his paunch as he stared at the dead Broken Wheel foreman. Branler, Reck knew, had been a heavy contributor to the Great Southwestern Rail Road and had been one of those who brought in the lawyer Peter Lawson. And Lawson was the man Reck was supposed to have killed.

The crowd inside the cottage increased and the overflow spilled out into the street. Reck could hear men shouting that Gillis had been killed. There was the sound of teams and saddlers moving up from the main part of town.

Doc Shanley said, "If Lothar Trancas is in town somebody ought to tell him about Gillis."

Branler fingered his brown beard. "I already sent for

Trancas." He stared thoughtfully at moon-faced Doc Shanley. "What I can't figure is why Gillis was yelling 'Corstain!' "

"Must be a guilty conscience," Shanley said worriedly, and glanced at the closet where Reck was hiding. "After all, Gillis helped put a rope around Reck Corstain's neck."

Dave Quimby glanced at his boss, then turned his eyes on Doc Shanley. "Reck's dead. So it must mean that old Sam has got himself a crew. He's the one been rustling our Morgans. And they say Sam Corstain has got Injun blood in him."

Doc Shanley shook his gray head. "Sam Corstain is blind. Besides that he wouldn't be fool enough to come back here. Trancas has sworn to kill him."

An ominous silence built up in the small room. Reck could see the suspicions that had been raised with these men when the name of Corstain was even mentioned.

Joe Branler thrust his bearded face at Doc Shanley. "You always was friendly with the Corstains, Doc. You know anything about Sam Corstain ridin' again?"

Before Shanley could answer, Dave Quimby said, "Funny that every rancher in the basin has been losin' hosses. We heard Jube Canavan's hiding back in the hills. We figured maybe it was him doin' all the hell raising. Now I ain't so sure. What you think about it, boss?"

Branler stared at his foreman a moment, then rubbed his bearded jaw. "I think you got an idea, Dave."

"So do I!"

A harsh voice angled in from the doorway. All eyes turned to Lothar Trancas who stood in the press of men around the door. He elbowed his way into the crowded room, his head lifted arrogantly. He glanced briefly at his dead foreman, showing no regret in his dark eyes. Then his gaze swung to Doc Shanley.

"If Sam Corstain is riding again you'd know about it, Doc," Trancas said. "Maybe you'd better talk."

A film of dust lay over Trancas' black shirt and trousers. When he moved his solid silver spurs made a chiming sound. Through the crack in the door, Reck stared in

fascination. Doc Shanley had said that Trancas has stolen those spurs from a dead man—a man named Reck Corstain.

Doc Shanley might be a drinking man but he still retained a certain courage. Now he faced Lothar Trancas with no fear in his eyes. "Sam Corstain is through. You drove him out, Trancas, you hanged his son. If Sam Corstain had come back to the Apache country he wouldn't waste his time on Tay Gillis. It would be you that he'd kill."

A muscle fluttered in Trancas' cheek. He was standing that way as if trying to make up his mind what to do next when a woman dressed in black suddenly made her way into the room. Men jerked off their hats at sight of her. She wore a shawl over her blue-black hair. Her red lips were faintly parted as she stared at Gillis on the table.

Trancas said, irritated, "You shouldn't be here, Zoe. Go back to the buggy. I'll be out in a minute."

But Zoe Corstain made no move to leave. She stood with her arms rigid at her sides so those eyes in the room could see the high arch of her breasts.

From the closet door, Reck got his first glimpse of Zoe in this new life of his. Mrs. Reck Corstain! In spite of what Doc Shanley had said about her he couldn't help but feel his pulse quicken. The palms of his hands grew moist just staring at her handsome figure. Then Trancas had her by the arm and was moving her through the crowd to the porch.

Joe Branler said, "We'll let it go for now, Doc. But if we find out you've thrown in with Sam Corstain, you'll hang with him."

Dave Quimby looked at the body on the table. "Things are sure goin' to hell around here. First it's Glover now it's Tay Gillis."

Doc Shanley said, "What happened to Glover?"

Quimby's Adam's apple bobbed in his thin neck when he said, "Glover got himself shot to pieces at Virginia City."

"How did you learn that?"

Quimby shrugged. "Fella named Mark Tooney wrote a letter to Sheriff Mendon telling him all about it."

"Too bad," Doc Shanley said, lowering his gaze. "Wonder how many of us here will still be alive this time next year?"

The men regarded him silently a moment. Then Branler gave an order and they picked up Gillis' body and bore it outside. At the door, Branler turned back. "Remember what I said about the Corstains, Doc. I'd hate to catch you with any of that crowd. But you'll sure as hell die if we do."

After the house had emptied, Reck made a swift departure into the night, keeping his horse to the shadows until he reached the flats beyond town. There he rode south toward Mexico. He had memorized the map Doc Shanley had drawn for him and using landmarks—Angelo Point, the sandstone maze of Diablo Gorge and the twisting green snake of the river, he reached his destination at sunup.

Ahead on a rise of ground in the center of a basin stood the adobe Doc Shanley had told him about. Reck felt a hollowness in the pit of his stomach, as he approached the old building that dated from the years when Santa Ana chased many a *Tejano* out of Texas. The adobe, Reck could see, had been partially restored from its decay. There was an unnatural stillness about the place and Reck knew somebody watched his approach. It couldn't be blind old Sam Corstain; it was probably the huge horse-faced old Mexican known as Caballo.

Doc Shanley had prepared Reck for this meeting; there was little love lost between Reck Corstain and his father. Since the accident that had blinded him, Sam Corstain had been even more bitter toward his son.

An old Mexican, gray and fat, waddled from the house, gripping a rifle. Reck had dismounted and moved cautiously toward a shaded porch. The Mexican peered against the blinding sunlight for a moment then turned

to yell to someone inside the adobe. *"El muchacho! Señor Reck! Ees come back!"*

A towering figure of a man came to the door, clutching a heavy cane in one hand. Reck watched, fascinated as the horribly scarred face swung in his direction.

Sam Corstain said, cocking his head at the sound of Reck's footsteps, "It ain't no surprise. I always figured you was too mean to die."

Reck halted, feeling shocked. Was this the meeting between a father and a son who had returned from the dead? Only those few harsh words? A breeze whipped across the flat, throwing sand against the 'dobe walls, rustling Sam Corstain's thick gray hair. Reck stared, seeing the ruthlessness on Corstain's face, the deep lines that angled from nostril to thin-lipped mouth. Flesh that had once been firm now hung loosely from the man's big-boned frame. Age had laid its hand heavily on Sam Corstain, but there was still an inner hardness reflected in the twist of his lips, the way he hunched forward gripping his cane. At his belt he wore an ivory-butted gun.

Sam Corstain said, "Keep him covered, Caballo. Till we see what he's up to."

Caballo, whose dark face was almost cherubic even though pock marked, picked up the rifle and said, "You keep the hands away from the gun, Reck."

The Mexican swung the rifle on Reck's midriff and by that gesture showed his loyalty to be unswerving to the old hellion who had brought him west from Texas thirty years ago. Not even the old man's son, whom Caballo had set on his first saddle and helped curl a small finger around the first gun trigger, could command that loyalty.

Caballo's usually bland face had hardened. "Better you not come back," he grumbled.

Reck stared at the Mexican seeing that indeed he did have the face of a horse, long-jawed and big-nosed and a mouth filled with yellow teeth. In Mexican, Caballo meant horse.

Reck tilted an *olla* hanging from the porch roof by a leather thong and tasted the sweet water. Wiping his lips

with the back of his hand, he said, "This is a hell of a welcome home from the grave." He laughed. "A greeting from my father."

"Call me Sam," the old man said irritably, turning his scarred face in the direction of Reck's voice. "I never stood for no sentiment. That's for your kind of man."

"Whatever you want—Sam."

Sam Corstain had groped his way to a cane-bottomed chair. He sank down, his sightless eyes turned in the direction of a green ridge that slashed its way across the flats in the distance—the site of the river.

Sam Corstain grunted, "Your voice don't sound the same."

"Doc Shanley said it was the noose that changed it. A man doesn't walk away from a hanging without bearing a few scars."

Sam Corstain's big mouth twisted in a secret smile. "I sent Caballo into town for some medicine. Two days ago. He seen you and Doc Shanley together."

Reck felt a chill against his spine and shot a glance at Caballo who still gripped the rifle. What if that eavesdropper might have been Lothar Trancas instead of Caballo? The thought put a fluttering in his stomach.

Sam Corstain chuckled. "Caballo thought he was seein' ghosts. I don't believe in that hogwash so I saddle up last night and Caballo leads me into town. We get to Doc Shanley's just when all the excitement is goin' on. We wait till Trancas and the rest leave, then we go in. But you've already headed out. We had a talk with Doc. He was drunk as usual, but sober enough to remember he drew you a map of this place. It took some ridin' to get here ahead of you."

Reck closed his eyes, feeling no kinship for this old man. What would happen if he one day regained his memory. Would he feel any different toward Sam Corstain?

"Doc Shanley says you're hell-bent for putting the Corstains back on the map," Sam Corstain continued, thumping his cane on the porch to emphasize his words. "He

says you ain't the same, that you got nerve and that Trancas is going to have himself a real bad time."

"Maybe that's the way it'll work out, Sam."

The old man rolled a smoke, accomplishing the feat with some dexterity despite his blindness. "The doc claims you don't remember nothing that's happened."

Bitterly Reck said, "Maybe it's better that I don't. From what I gather there wasn't much to choose between the Corstains and Trancas."

"I done what I seen fit!" Sam Corstain thundered. "If I had my eyes back I'd take a crew and burn out Trancas and everybody else who turned against me. Then I'd kill 'em."

Reck touched a match to Corstain's cigarette. "You heard about Gillis?" When San Corstain nodded, pleased, Reck said, "Brandler and his foreman figure you scalped him."

"Too bad I didn't think of it." He gripped Reck suddenly by the wrist, his lean fingers showing a surprising strength. "You'll be my eyes. We'll make them bastards wish they'd been fried in hog grease before I'm through with 'em!"

Reck said, "What'll Apache gain by this?"

"What I'm willing to give, as usual!" Corstain had twisted around in the chair to stare up at Reck. It was then that Reck could see how deep the scars around his eyes had cut into the skin. Sam Corstain said, "You sure have changed. First time you ever worried about anybody but yourself."

Reck said, "Jube Canavan scalped Gillis."

Sam Corstain slapped his thigh. "I'll be damned." Then he said softly, "Canavan will try to kill me sure as hell. I didn't figure he was back in this country." For the first time Sam Corstain seemed to show concern. "The damned, stinking rustler. I should have hanged him on the spot instead of sending him to Yuma."

"Why didn't you?"

Sam Corstain looked up with his sightless eyes. "Damn me, Reck, you sure as hell have lost your memory."

Reck felt a stiffening of his spine. "What about Canavan?"

"You was rustling horses from your own daddy," Sam Corstain said through his teeth. "I was bellowin' around that I'd lost prime hosses. When I found out it was you I couldn't let folks think my own son was a damned thief. So I catched Canavan and railroaded the son."

Reck felt his ears burn. What sort of rodent had he been in this other life of his? Reck stared at this blind old man who had been a despot in this far corner of the territory. Sam Corstain, Doc Shanley had said, let the town of Apache grow up around the Corstains. All the old man's hopes had been pinned on the two older boys, Henry and Bill. The smallpox epidemic had ended those dreams. A weak and shiftless Reck Corstain had been of little use to the old man in his schemes.

Reck stared at the dusty yard, the sagging corral fence. Beyond, the purple Duarte Hills rose toward the hot blue sky on the American side of the line. How could a blow on the head, he asked himself, change a man so completely? Now he was outraged at injustice. Before he had been a thief.

Sam Corstain said, "I'll welcome you back. But it's hard to forget you turned against me to favor that no-good woman you married."

"I must have been short of brains to marry a woman like her," Reck said, remembering what Doc Shanley had said about her.

Sam Corstain laughed unpleasantly. "She was soft and pretty and she wore them dresses that feel good under a man's hands. She like to drove you wild till you married her." He swore, thumping his cane against the hard-packed porch floor. "Why couldn't you take what she had to give and forget about puttin' a ring on her finger?"

"She'll be different," Reck said, feeling a strange stirring along his nerves as he recalled how she had looked last night in Doc Shanley's house. "She'll change even if I have to take the flat of my hand against her back side."

CHAPTER SEVEN

OVER A MEAL of *tacos* and *frijoles* Caballo cooked up, Reck listened to old Sam Corstain's accusations. "You and Zoe figured to own yourself a railroad. You corraled fifty-one percent of the stock in my railroad. You was going to put my Great Southwestern right in your hip pocket and tell your old daddy to go to hell."

Munching a *taco*, Reck said, "I don't remember any of it. Start at the beginning."

Sam Corstain obliged, cursing Lothar Trancas and Zoe and Reck with equal fervor. "Trancas bought the Broken Wheel for five hundred dollars after he run off my crew. You was supposed to be dead. I was blind. How the hell could I fight him?"

A year ago Sam Corstain had decided that Apache should have a railroad. As his Broken Wheel was the natural entrance to the valley, Sam Corstain had a good forty miles of level land for trackage. From the Broken Wheel boundary the rails would go north to connect with the Nevada Central.

"Trancas got wind of my plans and told a friend of his with the California-Sunset line. He found out that the CSL would pay a lot if the Great Southwestern Rail Road never laid a foot of track.

"Because I was blind I put you in charge of selling stock. You took your crew and made every son in the valley buy that stock for fifteen dollars a share. But while you was doing that, Trancas was sweet-talkin' your wife. She talks you into putting fifty-one percent of the stock in her name so I couldn't grab it. But you walked right into their noose. And it's just plain luck that you're here today—alive!"

Reck pushed his plate aside. "What about this Peter Lawson I'm suppposed to have killed?"

Sam Corstain took a cheroot from his pocket and rolled it between his palms. "Jim Branler started it all by saying

I was a crook," he grunted. "Branler got Lawson to find the money everybody paid for stock."

"And they probably also wanted to know why no track had been laid," Reck put in dryly.

Sam Corstain scowled at the mockery in his voice, then said, "Trancas seen a chance to get rid of you. He got you all liquored up and got you to shoot Lawson in the back."

"That's a damned lie," Reck said through his teeth.

Sam Corstain's lips twisted in a snarl. "If you can't remember anything else, how come you know you didn't kill Lawson?"

Reck felt the jolt of Sam Corstain's words. Instinctively he lifted a hand to the white scar at his temple. In the small kitchen he could hear Caballo rattling dishes in a pan. The horse-faced Mexican sang under his breath.

Reck said, "One of these days Trancas will tell the truth about how Lawson died."

"Trancas ain't goin' to be alive to tell anything," Sam Corstain growled. "You're taking a crew and—"

"Doc Shanley said there was forty thousand dollars paid for that stock. Where is it?"

Sam Corstain rubbed his chin. "So you know about that."

"Doc said a rep for the Nevada Central was in Apache and collected that stock money. He headed north to start laying track from the Nevada end of the line."

Sam Corstain said, "Damn Doc for telling folks I'm a thief."

"Doc's not the only one who thinks so. You had the stage waylaid at the Buttes, so I hear. You got away with that forty thousand."

A tight grin tucked in the corners of Sam Corstain's mouth. "I'm blind. You got to have eyes for that kind of a job."

Reck lifted his eyes to Caballo, wiping soapy hands on his faded levis. He stared at the Mexican a moment, then looked at Sam Corstain, squirming in the cane-bottomed chair. "Tell the truth for once, Sam."

Corstain swore. "All right," he admitted. "Me and Caballo stopped the stage."

Reck said, "We're going to use that forty thousand to start laying track."

Sam Corstain flung his cane suddenly against the wall. "Damn it, Reck, there wasn't any forty thousand and you know it."

"I don't remember," Reck said.

"When me and Caballo opened the strong box there wasn't no gold—only rocks."

"What happened to the gold?"

"Trancas emptied the box before it ever left town," Sam Corstain said. "I figured you was in on it."

"From the way it looks," Reck said thoughtfully, "Lothar Trancas has copped all the aces in the deck."

Sam Corstain nodded his bushy gray head. "He got the ranch and the building in town I'd mortgaged to help finance the track layin'—and other things."

"What other things?"

"You'll know when I get ready to tell you!" the old man cried.

Reck saw Caballo come into the room, throw a fat hip on a corner of a window ledge. Reck said, "Somebody's lying, Sam. With you blind, how do you know there wasn't gold in that box? Maybe Caballo—"

The Mexican snatched up his rifle from where it rested against the mud wall. He levered a shell into the chamber and pointed the muzzle at Reck. "You do not say thees things about me," he warned.

Sam Corstain said, "You're loco, Reck. I may be blind, but I can sure feel the difference between a piece of rock and a double eagle."

Reck threw a half-consumed cigarette to the dirt floor. He got to his feet, laid a hand on Caballo's arm. "Take care of the old man," he said, and stepped out into the blinding sunlight.

Sam Corstain yelled: "You go movin' around alone and Trancas will hang you good this time!"

Reck said, "He doesn't know I'm alive—not yet, anyhow. That's my best weapon."

The old man chuckled. "You *are* changed like Doc Shanley said. When I left Texas they called me buscadero—bad man. You're buscadero now."

Reck said with a tight smile, "A chip off the old block."

Sam Corstain waved a veined hand. "When you come back here have a gun crew with you. We ain't got gold to pay 'em with now. But there'll be plenty later on. Because when I'm ridin' again Apache will settle my debts with its own blood!"

The full heat of the day was on Reck as he followed a dim trail that cut through the Duarte Hills. At every beat of his horse's hoofs against the ground he could hear Sam Corstain's shrill voice and remember his threat to those who had opposed him in this valley. Reck moved cautiously, scanning distant ridges, keeping to the lowlands so as not to be skylighted on a hogback. Once he saw riders moving a small bunch of cows but the distance was too great to tally them. It might be some of Jube Canavan's crew turning their talents from horse rustling to the more prosaic business of slapping a new brand on a two-year-old.

It turned his stomach raw to think that he was kin to that old hellion back there at the run-down adobe. Buscadero, Sam Corstain had called him; the same stripe as that old brigand who had ruled Apache for thirty years and then lost his throne to Lothar Trancas. He thought of those he had either seen or dealt with in Apache since his return: Trancas, Zoe, Gillis. All cut from the same greedy pattern. What could be gained by staying here, he asked himself suddenly. Would the citizens of Apache fare any better under the heel of Sam Corstain than they now did under the heel of Lothar Trancas? He pulled his horse into the shade afforded by a rock outcropping and rolled a cigarette. Wind devils kicked up dust around his boots.

Think the thing out, he told himself. Weigh it all.

According to Doc Shanley, the Great Southwestern had

to connect with the Nevada Central before January 1, or option on the right-of-way would expire. At its leisure the California Sunset line would then build through to Apache. Trancas, for having doomed the threat of the Corstain railroad, would become a man of power.

But was the fight worth it? To the north in Frisco was a new life. A life with Ivis Drake. Somehow he could find her. If he stayed here it would probably mean his life. And for what? To put Sam Corstain back in power. How much loyalty did he owe that blind old devil? He could not remember him so why wouldn't the loyalty remain in the past with the rest of his memory? He could even forget Trancas and what he had done. Reck instinctively put a hand to his throat at the memory of the rope that had almost choked his life away. Yes, he could even forget Lothar Trancas. Zoe could have him—and welcome.

Having made up his mind to shake the dust of this valley from his boots, Reck knew he had one obligation. He had to tell Doc Shanley. The doctor had been his only friend and had risked his neck to help him in his strange quest. It was only right that Doc should know he had no stomach for the fight. So far, this plump little doctor was the only decent thing he had found in Apache.

Giving Apache a cursory inspection from a knoll, Reck kept to back streets and darkened alleys. By this time the sun had given up its last red glow in the west and stars were dotting the sky. The town seemed quiet, and then he realized it was the supper hour. Shop keepers had closed their doors and gone home. Only Bulwar's Saloon showed any life.

Even though it was early in the evening, Doc Shanley's house was dark. At first Reck supposed the medico had gone to call on a patient, but the doctor's bony gray was loose in the small corral behind the house. Reck frowned, slipped from the saddle. The back door of the house hung open. Something tightened his nerves; he didn't know whether it was a foreign sound or whether it was instinct. Drawing his gun he crept into the house. He

stood in the dark kitchen. For a moment he considered lighting a lamp, then decided against it.

"Doc," he called softly.

Only silence answered him. Tension increased across his shoulders as he moved to the front room. It was empty. His eyes were better adjusted to the darkness now, and through the open bedroom door he saw a lumpy shape on the big brass bed. The rank smell of stale whisky was faint in the air. Doc was on another drunk, he decided, and felt a measure of pity for the man.

He moved to the bedroom, put out a hand to shake Doc awake. His fingers touched Doc's shirt front, feeling an unaccustomed stickiness. His heart thudded wildly as he yanked aside a curtain. Faint moonlight streamed into the room. Doc lay on his back, clutching his small revolver. His eyes stared unseeing at the cracked plaster wall. Reck turned him on his back, seeing the limp way the head rolled. The gun clattered to the floor from Doc Shanley's lifeless fingers.

He killed himself, Reck thought. *He couldn't stand facing himself every morning after a night with the bottle.*

He wondered why no one had heard the shot and come to investigate. Then he realized Doc lived at the far end of town. No houses were close. In Apache a gunshot was not uncommon.

He was about to turn for the door when some foreign sound caught his ear. He stiffened, letting his eyes swing from one side of the room to the other. A vagrant breeze rattled a windowshade. At first he thought that was the sound that had tightened his nerves. Then he heard the faint noise again. It could be a man shifting his weight, putting pressure on a loose board in the floor.

His eyes swung to the closet where he had hidden when Tay Gillis was brought here. The door was at the end of a short hallway and it stood ajar. Reck moved slowly out of the bedroom as if to leave by the front door.

As he reached the hall, he spun and drew his gun. A man kicked open the closet door, yelling, "Get him, Luke!"

In that moment Reck knew they had him in a crossfire. He also knew that these two men had come here and murdered Doc Shanley. The doc hadn't taken his own life. A drunk he might have been, but not a coward. This was the work of Lothar Trancas.

The man in the closet fired first and Reck saw a narrow, tight-lipped face in the gun flash. Behind him he heard the faint tinkle of window glass. He pressed himself against the wall. He fired twice at the man emerging from the closet, saw him pitch forward, heard the thud his body made against the floor. Then he was turning. Sweat broke out across his back. A jog in the hallway had momentarily screened him from the man in the front room. Now, as the gun echoes died, he heard the man crossing the room, trying to get into position.

"Blacky," the man said. "Blacky!"

Reck fired at the sound of the voice, hearing the man sob. He waited, not daring to put his head into the doorway to see if this man called Luke was out of it. He waited, hearing excited voices far down the road. One gunshot in Apache wouldn't be cause for alarm. A series of shots would bring folks running.

He heard the front door suddenly yanked open, the sounds of a man staggering down the steps. Reck jumped to the porch, fired once, but the man had cut around a corner of the house. Now, with the hot night wind blowing in his face, Reck could see dark shapes converging on the house.

"Somebody's shootin' up Doc's place!" a man shouted out in the night blackness.

Quickly he turned back into the house. He stepped over the body of the man sprawled in the hall. At the back door he found his horse, leaped into the saddle. The man called Luke was evidently hiding out there in the thick brush that bordered the lot behind Shanley's house. If Reck stayed to search for him, the crowd would ask no questions. He was Reck Corstain and they'd make short work of hanging him to the nearest tree.

As he spurred his horse across the yard, a man carrying

a lantern appeared suddenly around the corner of a shed. He threw up a rifle. Bending low in the saddle, Reck slammed the barrel of his gun against the crown of the man's hat. The stranger groaned, fell, shattering the lantern. A gun opened up from the street, and as Reck cleared the alley he heard the smash of lead against the shed wall.

A rifle cracked from the darkness behind him. He felt his horse break stride and kicked his feet out of the stirrups. He dove headlong, breaking his fall with his shoulders in the heavy dust. His roan was cartwheeling and now it came to rest against a haybaler in the weed-grown lot. Behind him Reck could hear the pound of boots. Men would soon be hitting the saddle, hunting him down.

For an instant he considered his position. This horse he had purchased in Nevada. There was no telltale brand, nothing in his saddlebags to reveal his identity. Ahead was a house. A woman stood on the back porch, holding a lamp in her hand, trying to see what the trouble was.

"Some drunks shooting up the town, Ma'am," he said, keeping his face in shadow.

"Those Broken Wheel riders should be kept out of town," the woman said bitterly. "They're always causing trouble."

He crossed the next street, moving leisurely with his hat brim pulled low. He saw men running toward Doc Shanley's house, but no one attached this slow-walking stranger to the ruckus at the far end of town.

Presently he found himself in the blackness behind Bulwar's Saloon. With trembling fingers he rolled a cigarette, then not wanting to risk a match, he dropped the makings into the dust. The back of his neck was wet and now he felt a dull throb at his temple. It had been close back there at the house. He couldn't understand why Luke and Blacky had not cut him down the minute he walked into the house. Then he realized that whoever had sent them on their grim chore had wanted it to appear as a suicide. They were hoping he would leave with-

out discovering them. But when he drew his gun there was nothing else for them to do but fight.

The death of the old man who had saved his life, changed everything for Reck. The senseless fight to again put the Corstains in power was one thing. To avenge the death of Doc Shanley was quite another.

He was considering his next move when he thought of his warm-eyed wife. Zoe would welcome him. He would have a sanctuary in this town. The Corstain mansion. He laughed harshly. He was turning to move deeper into the alley shadows when he glanced into the back windows of Bulwar's Saloon. The place had nearly emptied when the shooting had started at the far end of town. But one man stood at the long rosewood bar that caught Reck's attention. There was something vaguely familiar about the black broadcloth suit, the polished black shoes, the ramrod stiff back. He could not see the man's face as yet. He waited there, hearing the dull thud of his heart.

The man turned his head to order another drink from Bulwar, a huge, bald man with a fringe of black hair.

The stranger at the bar was a stranger no longer. Even as the man savored the drink Bulwar sat before him, Reck could see the mocking smile he was to remember so well. Mark Tooney had left the Tivoli in Virginia City and come to Apache to cash in on the fortunes of Reck Corstain.

Tooney kept glancing toward the door as if waiting for someone. Waiting for Trancas, Reck told himself. Trancas would pay well for the information that Reck still lived.

There was no time to deal with Tooney. That could come later. First there was the problem of not being caught here afoot in town. Slowly he made his way toward the river where the town mansions were spread out along the banks. One night Doc Shanley had come with him to a promontory and pointed out the Corstain house. Reck felt a slow anger when he thought of the brutal death of the doctor. Someone would pay for that.

Doc Shanley had given him the layout of the house,

telling him of the sullen couple who lived in the cottage behind the stable and did Zoe's cooking and kept the house. And Doc Shanley had not neglected to tell him of old Mike, the dog Reck had brought to the Broken Wheel as a pup fifteen years ago.

"Mike seemed to be about the only thing you ever cared for," Doc Shanley had said. "Until Zoe came along."

Cautiously Reck climbed the picket fence that surrounded the Corstain place. Faint lamplight glowed through the lower-floor windows of the house. Upstairs a bedroom window showed a square of soft light through pulled drapes. Reck wet his lips. Was his wife up there with Lothar Trancas? He drew his gun, stepping through the thick stand of poplars to a clearing. The cottage behind the carriage house was dark. He moved toward the big house, his ears cocked for any foreign sounds. He passed the shed Doc Shanley had pointed out to him that night, the shed where Lothar Trancas had him hanged. At sight of that wall he shuddered.

He was nearly to the back porch of the house when a low growl brought him up short. A huge, furry shape sat in the center of a weed-grown path, blocking his further progress.

Reck said softly, "Mike. Here, boy."

The old dog had been standing stiff-legged. Now, at sound of the name, he sat down, cocking his head to one side, his tongue lolling. In the moonlight he looked scarred and grizzled and weary. Reck advanced, put a hand tentatively on the dog's shaggy head. Mike's tail brushed the dusty path in a brief wag. But the dog did not follow Reck to the porch.

He tried the rear door, found it open and slipped through a long kitchen with its black range and work tables. Slipping off his boots, he moved across the parlor floor, gun in hand. No one seemed to be downstairs. From the second floor, he could hear a woman singing a snatch of a song. Reck listened, feeling sweat break out on the palms of his hands. He recognized that voice from the

night he had heard her speak at Doc Shanley's. Zoe was up there. And from all appearances she was alone.

He crept up the wide circular staircase. This was a fabulous house, he had learned. When Sam Corstain made his first money in cattle he took his wife to Europe. The furnishings of this house, the staircase, the wallpaper had come from the old country. It had cost a fortune. But Martha Corstain, so Doc Shanley had said, would rather have had a husband more considerate of her daily welfare than to be immersed in all this luxury. It was still the finest home in Apache, and now it was the abode of Zoe Corstain.

He moved along a hallway, hearing her begin to sing again. She seemed happy. He wondered for how long. At the entrance to her bedroom, he paused in the doorway, watching her. She sat before a mirror, combing the glossy hair which hung in blue-black waves to her waist. Her shoulders moved beneath a rose-colored wrapper. The wrapper had slipped from one shoulder and now he could see it plump and white in the glow of the green-shaded lamp on the bureau. A black dress was laid out neatly on the lace coverlet of a four-poster bed.

He holstered his gun, moved into the room, his feet making no sound in the soft carpeting. It was several seconds before she caught sight of him in the mirror. He watched her amber eyes grow wide, saw the fright in their depths and enjoyed it. He watched the slow lift of her black brows, saw the corners of her moist mouth tighten. He saw her back stiffen. Then, with a clatter, the comb fell to the glass top of the bureau and she sprang to her feet and faced him. As she whirled, he caught a glimpse of white thigh.

"Reck!" she cried in a strangled voice. "Oh, my God! It can't be true!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

IN HER awful fright at seeing his tall figure in the doorway, she had backed against the bureau so hard that jars

of fancy powders and cologne water fell to the floor, filling the room with their mingled scents.

He said, "It's me, Zoe." Then he added. "Tay Gillis was every bit as scared as you are."

Terror replaced the fright in her eyes. "You scalped Gillis! You fiend!"

Instantly he regretted that he had mentioned the Broken Wheel foreman's name. But the damage was done. He advanced slowly, halted in front of her. "I'm not going to kill you," he said.

For a long moment she stared into his metal gray eyes, as if seeking the truth. Then, as if satisfied that he meant her no harm, some of the color slowly returned to her oval face.

Zoe put her hands on his arms, running them to his shoulders as if to make sure he still lived. Faint lamplight washed across the shell brass of his belt that was cinched loosely across his lean hips. There was a fluid grace to his walk that seemed incongruous with such a tall and angular body, as he moved her to the lamp to study her face. Most men with his height had a clumsy sway when not in the saddle.

He said, feeling a stirring in him, "I didn't scalp Gillis."

"Even if you did," she said, "I wouldn't blame you. He was the one who really hurt you."

He could feel her hands pressed tightly against his arms, feel the warmth of her palms. He stared down at her upturned face, seeing the sultry lights in her amber eyes, the soft, moist mouth.

"Oh, my darling," she murmured, pressing her dark head against his chest. "I don't know how or why you could possibly be alive, but I'm glad. So glad."

Instinctively he raised his hands to her, crossing his arms behind her back. His wife, he thought. The wife he had married and loved in this big room. Yet she was a stranger. It gave him a strange heady feeling as if he had stolen into the bedroom of some beautiful stranger, and instead of screaming for help she was inviting him with her eyes to stay.

He lifted a hand to her dark head, stroking it, feeling the electric quality of her hair. She pressed against him so that he could feel the pressure of her breasts beneath the thin wrapper. Blood coursed warmly through his veins. He was a damned fool, he knew that, but he couldn't help himself. He tilted his head over her face, feeling her lips suddenly come to life beneath his own. It was as if he were narcotized, unable to help himself.

Then, suddenly the spell was broken as something hard rammed him in the stomach and she sprang out of his grasp. And he looked down, seeing that she held a small revolver.

"Take your goddam hands off me!" she screamed. "Alive or dead, I told you once you'd never have me again! I meant it!"

She turned to open a window and cry for help. He moved quickly, the passion that had rocked him turned to smouldering anger. As she whirled for the window, he struck her wrist with the flat of his hand. The revolver dropped to the soft carpet. When she dived for it, he caught her by the arms, spinning her so that the wrapper whipped to her knees. She wrestled, the black hair falling about her face, terror once more in her eyes.

As they swayed past the bureau, her elbow knocked a powder box to the floor, spilling the contents in a powdery smear across the carpet. A curse broke from her red lips when she saw that a folded piece of paper lay exposed amidst the powder. When she tried to reach the paper with a frantic desperation, he caught her around the waist, throwing her onto the bed. She rolled over, coming to a sitting position. She stared as he picked up the paper. Then she came off the bed like a spitting cat in her fury.

As she lifted a hand to rake his face with her long fingernails, he said coldly, "That's enough, Zoe."

She hesitated, staring up at him, as if he had spoken for the first time. "Reck—"

He said through his teeth, "I won't take anything off you. Not any more I won't."

He unfolded the paper. Seeing she was a safe distance away, he saw that it was addressed to Mrs. Reck Corstain, Apache, Arizona Territory.

Dear Madam: I have information of vital interest to you. Please make no move with Great Southwestern Rail Road stock until I arrive. A great deal of money is involved.

Respectfully, Mark Tooney.

Reck shoved the letter into his pocket. "He knew the talk of money would interest you."

She stood, her bosom heaving, fiddling with the ties of her wrapper. All the fight seemed to have gone out of her. "Do you know this Tooney?"

He smiled grimly, remembering seeing Tooney at Bulwar's Saloon this night. His eyes swung to the black dress on the bed.

"Going out?"

She bit her lip. "There's a dance at the Hall."

His gray eyes thinned. "Trancas taking you?"

"I'm to meet him there. He'll send a buggy for me. There was a shooting awhile ago at the other end of town. He had to go and see about it." She moved toward him again. "If you're still afraid of Trancas, you'd better leave. This time he'll make sure of you."

She gave him a taunting smile, but it did not reach the depths of her amber eyes. She was puzzled that he should be here alive when he should be dead.

He remembered all the stories he had heard about her. He ran a hand over his broken nose, let his fingers touch his throat.

Suddenly he slapped her across the face. "That is for your part in what Trancas did to me!"

She recoiled from the blow, but this time she did not fight. She rubbed a hand across the red spot on her cheek that his fingers had made. "You're different, Reck. You're not the same. What's happened to you?"

"A lot of things," he said in sudden anger. "I was ready

to leave Apache. But a decent man was murdered tonight. That's the reason I'm staying."

"Who was it?"

"Doc Shanley."

The news brought only a slight compression to her lips. "He's been drinking a lot," Zoe said. "It was probably suicide, not murder."

"Is that what Trancas told you to say?"

She shrugged. "Trancas said he wouldn't be surprised if one day Doc Shanley shot himself. A man can't drink like that day after day—"

He said, "Put away that black dress. You don't need mourning now."

She pressed herself against him again and now he knew why she could have her way with a man. It angered him that even now, despite trying to draw a gun on him, he felt his pulse quicken at her nearness.

"For the first time I really like you, Reck," she said softly. "Stay here with me. We'll talk in the morning. I never wanted you before. I wanted the Corstain name and the Corstain money. Now I want you."

She turned to the lamp, lifted the chimney to blow out the flame.

He said, "Get dressed, we're going to the dance."

In the room that once should have been his own, he found a black suit that seemed too snug in the shoulders. He put on his shellbelt, then his coat. The very surprise of his entrance, he knew, had kept her nimble brain from working as smoothly as usual. She was a cool one, taking his return from the grave as calmly as if he had just returned from a night at Bulwar's Saloon.

He went down the stairs with her. How could he help but notice that she was a beautiful woman. She wore a red dress that set off her glowing skin.

"Red looks good on you," he said.

She said, "It's not too late, Reck. Stay here—with me."

There was invitation in her amber eyes and when he made no reply, she said angrily, "You *have* changed."

Downstairs he stood for a moment staring at these things that should be familiar, the long gun case that ran the length of one wall with its leaded glass doors, the enameled sideboard. So far as he was consciously aware he had never before set foot in this house.

And he was recalling what Doc Shanley had said: "You may regain your memory in the next hour or you may live the rest of your life with your past a complete blank."

Zoe pointed to a long mahogany table in the center of the room. "The last time I saw you was in a coffin on that table." She watched him closely. "You weren't dead at all." Then she bit her lip. "Do you remember the things that were said that night in this room?"

"Maybe."

As he took her by the arm to move to the door, she said, "You're a fool to go to the dance. Trancas will kill you."

He found a horse in the barn and a saddle. And when he led the saddled mount into the yard, she said, "I won't ride unless it's in a buggy."

For an answer he swung her into the saddle, pulling her across his lap. The horse, unaccustomed to double weight, reared, but with one hand Reck fought him down.

For a moment Zoe was tense in his arms, then she put a hand behind his neck. "It's not too late to turn back, Reck." Her breath was soft against his ear as she whispered, "Remember what you told me on our wedding night?"

"No."

"You said there never was a woman like me."

As they moved down Jefferson Street, Reck looked out across the flats and beyond to the dark bulk of the Duarte Hills. Here was a rich valley with beef and silver waiting for a railroad that would not come until Lothar Trancas and the men of the California Sunset line got their own terms and bled the country bone-dry.

This was a foolish move, perhaps, Reck knew. But the very boldness of it might put Trancas at least momentarily back on his heels. Mark Tooney was in town. The

man had either told Trancas that Reck Corstain lived or soon would tell him.

Bluff it through was the only way, Reck had decided back there at the house.

From the second floor of the old Corstain Building came the thump of piano and drum, the screech of a fiddle. Zoe fought him as he led her up the long flight of stairs, but he held her tightly. He was careful to grip her arms with the fingers of his left hand, keeping his right hand free.

Dancers swirled across the floor. Tobacco smoke made a blue-gray haze below the overhead lamps. On the landing he paused, searching those faces, seeing laughing girls with high-piled hair, swinging past in their Sunday dresses; cowhands with hair slicked and faces scrubbed, trail dust wiped from their boots.

A man checking guns and hats at the door, bowed to Zoe. "Glad to see you ain't in mourning, Mrs. Corstain," he said.

Reck said, "She's got a good enough reason."

The man, short and a little drunk, had a hand out for Reck's hat. Now he jerked back the hand. Blood drained from his thin face. "Corstain!" he screamed. "Reck Corstain!"

He took one look at Reck with his frightened eyes, then went pounding down the stairs, yelling that he had just seen a ghost.

At this outburst the music died on a discordant note and the shuffling feet stilled on the dance floor. A fly buzzing against one of the lamp chimneys seemed loud in the big and silent room. Reck moved to the doorway with Zoe on his arm.

Sheriff Tom Mendon, standing against the far wall, chewing on a cold cigar, suddenly felt cold in the stomach. His gaze followed the gaze of the others in this hall. He forgot to chew on his cigar when he saw the tall, yellow-haired man in the doorway; a man with metal gray eyes dressed in a black suit with the tip of a holster showing beneath his square cut coat. The sheriff saw

how he clung to his wife's arm as if unwilling to let her go. Zoe's lips, he saw, were two pale lines across his face.

At first Sheriff Mendon had thought that the night's excitement and the drinks he had consumed downstairs at Bulwar's had addled his senses. Reck Corstain was a ghost. He had kicked off the lid of his coffin at the cemetery and walked in here. That was his first thought and he could feel the hair stiffen at the back of his neck. But there was Zoe at his side and she was scared as hell. That meant Reck was no ghost. He was alive. Somehow they had buried the wrong man.

Sheriff Mendon, a thin, well-scrubbed man, ran a trembling hand over his thinning hair that was plastered with pomade tight against his skull. This had been a hell of a night. Doc Shanley found with his head blown off and Blacky Trobar lying dead in the hall. Luke Daniels had said he and Blacky had just come in from the Broken Wheel when they heard a shot. They went to investigate and Doc Shanley killed Blacky and put a bullet in Luke's leg. Luke hadn't explained why, if they were coming in from the Broken Wheel, they happened to be at that far end of town.

Things were going to hell around here on a blanket. First Glover gets killed in Virginia City and then Tay Gillis. The only redeeming feature about Gillis was the blonde who lived in the alley behind Bulwar's. Now she might give a smile to another man once in a while instead of being all business.

Sheriff Mendon thought, as he saw Reck, *Here it starts all over again.*

He enjoyed wearing a badge and the importance that went with his office. He didn't enjoy violence. His deputy, Jody Keenan, took care of the unsavory chores. He wished Jody was here now instead of down at the jail office. He knew that as sheriff he should say something, but his throat was dry.

Reck had seen the thin man with the star on his vest, and when Mendon made no move toward him, he relaxed slightly. But dancers and their escorts had started to move

to either side of the big room, leaving a lane across the floor that led straight to Lothar Trancas.

Trancas had been in the act of lifting a drink. When he saw Reck standing there the glass fell to the floor.

Into the silence, Trancas said, "I knew you were alive, Corstain! I felt it in my bones! And Doc Shanley knew it—"

"And it cost him his life!"

Trancas's dark eyes were hard against Reck's face. "Maybe that's why Doc committed suicide." As if feeling he had to say more, Trancas said for the crowd's benefit, "Two of my men tried to stop him. Doc killed one and shot Luke Daniels."

Reck said, "Doc was murdered. It's the only reason I've stayed in this filthy town."

Trancas smiled coldly, his teeth glistening white against the dead black of his mustache. He stood erect, his black suit neatly pressed. Even now he was an imposing figure. To a portly man at his elbow, Trancas said, "A yellow dog has more respect, Hemphill, than a Corstain in this town."

So this was Hemphill, Reck thought, the big auger with the California Sunset line. Well-fed in his expensive broadcloth, and with a plump, pink-cheeked face. The man's eyes were cold, calculating. "You've got a chance to run, Corstain. Take it."

Reck suddenly shoved Zoe aside, saw her huddle against the wall rubbing the marks his fingers had made on her bare arm. Her amber eyes were frightened as they swung from Reck to Trancas.

"Kill him, Lothar," she said through her small white teeth.

Reck said, "What about it, Trancas? Are you going to oblige the lady?"

Trancas' eyes were murderous, but he spread his hands away from his sides, the palms up. "I checked my gun at the door."

"Get it!"

Trancas stood immobile, the stark hatred he felt for

this man showing in the tight set of his mouth. In the lamplight sweat shone on his mustache. Instead of walking to the long table where an assortment of guns were laid out, Trancas jerked his head at Sheriff Mendon.

"Corstain murdered Peter Lawson. Arrest him."

Sheriff Mendon let his cold cigar sag. "I tore up the warrant," he said in a feeble voice, "when Corstain—died."

"Get another," Trancas ordered, stiff with fury. Then, seeing white-whiskered Judge Lane Tolliver shoving his bony figure through the crowd, he added, "The judge will sign the warrant."

Judge Lane Tolliver had not been dancing. That was for the young. But he liked to come and smoke a cigar and sip a drink and watch the young folks. He had not counted on violence this night. A black night it had been, with the death of Doc Shanley. He should have not been surprised that Reck Corstain would step out of his coffin.

He eyed Reck alone in the doorway. Then he turned, seeing the faces; women with fright in their eyes, some men with a like fear, others showing the pure hatred and contempt they felt for a Corstain. Such men were Joe Branler and his foreman, Quimby, at the far end of the big room.

Judge Tolliver jerked a thumb at Sheriff Mendon. "If I sign a warrant tonight will you see that this prisoner isn't again lynched on his way to jail?"

Sheriff Mendon's thin face reddened. "It wasn't my fault—"

Reck said, "Before you sign any warrant, Judge, maybe you'd better wait until you hear what Tay Gillis had to say."

Reck was bluffing, but he saw with a lift of his spirits that the possibility that Gillis might have talked had stunned Trancas. He stood rigid, hands closed in fists at his sides.

Joe Branler shoved his way through the crowd, Quimby at his side. The big, brown-bearded JG owner was trembling with fury. "I had no use for Gillis," he rumbled, "but

I'm thinkin' you used a knife on him to make him talk, then you scalped him."

Into the shocked silence, Dave Quimby, his Adam's apple working in his thin neck, said, "Gillis was yellin' your name when we found him. It sure adds up to me."

Judge Lane Tolliver stared at Reck. "You Corstains have written a bloody chapter in Apache, but of all the things you've done, this is the worst. The Corstains have been thieves, killers. And now they've stooped so low they take a knife and scalp a man."

There had been hatred on these faces, but now there was loathing. There was no friend in this big room; not a man here who wouldn't welcome the chance to gun him down. If there had been any wavering before from siding Trancas or the Corstains, it was gone now. Even Joe Branler would side Trancas in this.

Suddenly Reck seized Zoe by the wrist, pulled her against him so he could get an arm around her waist. With the other hand he drew his gun, cocking it, and the sound ran clean and lethal into the silence of the dance hall. He smelled the faint odor of dust that had not settled to the floor, the musky smell of women, the rank odor of riders too long in the saddle that not even the perfume of bay rum could kill.

"You're wrong about Gillis," Reck said. "Jube Canavan killed him. Gillis cut him up with a knife and Canavan paid him back." He began to back to the door. "Keep away from me. I'll kill the first man that comes after me. That goes for you, too, Sheriff."

And it was in that moment that his eyes lifted toward the piano at the far end of the room. A girl in a green dress stood beside the piano, her coppery hair pinned on top of her head. She stood stiffly as if what she had heard in this room had been a blow. Even at this distance and in the dim light he could see the shocking blue of her eyes.

"Ivis," he said under his breath. And now his eyes found a banner on the wall behind the piano: Miss Ivis Drake and her Songs."

Ivis Drake deliberately turned her back, and Reck felt a new bitterness he could hardly contain.

Zoe said mockingly, "The lady doesn't like it that Reck Corstain scalped a white man."

He pulled Zoe down the stairs to the street. A crowd had gathered there, drawn by the news that Reck Corstain still lived. But no one lifted a hand when they saw his gun. He pulled Zoe into the saddle and the two of them rode hastily for the Corstain house. There he made her take off her dress, gave her a man's shirt and pants. She rolled up the pants, tied the shirt at the tails and tucked it into the waistband.

"I won't go with you!" she cried. "I'm not leaving my house!"

"Your house," he said with a harsh laugh. "I want those shares of Great Southwestern Rail Road stock."

She tried to fight him, but he shoved her aside. When he moved to the bureau she moved that way, trying to keep him off. She threw a jar of powder at him. He ducked and the jar crashed against the wall. In one of the drawers he found a key and he knew it had some connection with the railroad stock, for her amber eyes were frightened. Behind the bureau he found a strong box. The key fit the box. He unlocked it and stared at a pile of bright green certificates. Then, seizing her by the wrist, he dragged her outside. He hid the box under a pile of rubbish in the shed, then took her out into the yard.

"I'll come back and get that stock," she told him defiantly. "You can't get away with this!"

"It's a hell of a long walk in high heeled shoes—from Mexico."

CHAPTER NINE

WHEN RECK CORSTAIN had left the dance hall, Trancas poured himself a drink, took his leave of Hemphill and went downstairs. The music had started up and a few couples danced tentatively. But the spirit of the occasion had been broken by the dramatic reappearance of Reck

Corstain. A curly-haired man, walking with a limp, came out of the shadows.

"I seen him, Trancas," the man said thinly. "I could have shot him but I was afraid of hittin' the gal."

Trancas frowned. Luke Daniels had botched one job tonight. Doc Shanley had gotten drunk the other night in Bulwar's and openly said it was possible the Corstains would be back. Trancas figured the doctor knew more than he was telling. One way to silence him was to have Blacky and Luke ride in on him and make it look like suicide.

"It was Corstain at the Doc's tonight," Luke Daniels said, cursing at the bullet that had sliced across his thigh. "I still don't figure how he's walkin' around when I seen him layin' in his coffin there at the Corstain place."

"You had a chance to kill him at Doc Shanley's. Why didn't you?"

Luke Daniels cut at the air with the flat of his hand. "I wouldn't have stood that much chance."

Lothar Trancas scowled. "Reck Corstain never was much shakes with a gun unless he had it against your back. And upstairs he was ready to shoot it out with me."

"If you ask me, he's sure as hell changed."

Trancas grunted, "Nobody asked you." He rubbed his jaw, then taking Daniels by the arm, moved down the darkened walk with him. "It's worth a hundred dollar bonus if Corstain doesn't see the sun come up in the morning."

Luke Daniels, limping on his bad leg, said, "I'll take a couple of the boys and—"

"Do you want to split that hundred? Keep it for yourself. I want this to be between you and me. Nobody else. In the morning, if Corstain is still alive, I'll have to go after him."

Luke Daniels stared up at Trancas' dark face. "You don't want trouble while that CSL man is in town."

"I've got Hemphill in my hind pocket," Trancas said through his teeth. "If I have to go after Corstain openly

there'll be shooting. A lot of messy killing might scare off those Frisco bankers."

For a moment Luke Daniels was silent until a wagon load of couples had pulled away from the dance hall and headed out the west road. "If you ain't too particular how Reck Corstain gets it—"

"Front or back. It makes no difference to me. Just so he's dead."

Two riders moved slowly into the first fold of the Duarte hills. Slanting moonlight revealed one of the riders to be a woman. Her black hair was braided and hung across the shoulders of a man's blue shirt. She wore jeans and held them up with a bright red sash. Now and then she angrily jerked at the thong that held her right wrist. Her companion held the other end of the thong.

"You'd think I was a prize fox you'd trapped for his pelt," Zoe said bitterly. "Take off this pigging string. I won't get away."

"That's right," Reck said. "You won't have a chance to run back to Trancas."

The hills closed in around them. Even though haste was imperative, Reck did not increase their steady pace. Behind them plodded a shaggy old dog.

"If Trancas has the brains I think he has," Zoe said, smiling thinly, "he'll be after you. At the rate we're going he could catch us in a hay wagon."

"The last Corstain is leaving Apache," Reck said. "Mike is a Corstain. If we go any faster he won't be able to keep up with us."

It had taken some doing to get Mike to follow them. When a dog got that old, Reck guessed, he was reluctant to stir around much.

Zoe said, "You always were sentimental about that damned dog. I wish now I'd taken Lothar's advice and had him killed." When Reck made no reply, Zoe said, "Who was that red-headed woman?"

Reck winced. Seeing Ivis Drake here in Apache had, for the moment, completely unnerved him. He had a

strong desire to take her away with him. But it was too late for that now. Trancas and the rest knew he still lived. They'd never rest until he was in his grave permanently. His sudden reappearance had shocked them. From now on every man in the valley would be his enemy.

As they entered Rustler's Pass, Reck thought of Ivis, remembering the touch of her warm hands. A man should have a woman like that. Instead he was saddled with Zoe.

"I saw the way you looked at that woman," Zoe said, a faint edge of anger in her voice. "Who is she?" When Reck did not reply, she said, "While you were gone you must have been having yourself a time."

"While I was gone," he reminded her bluntly, "you had Lothar Trancas."

For a long moment Zoe was silent, then she said, "You've changed so much, Reck. I don't know how or why. But you're not the same man." Her voice softened. "Tonight you faced Trancas. Before you were afraid of him."

"Maybe it took a hanging to give me some guts."

At Rustler's Creek they made camp. Reck threw blankets on the ground for Zoe. Above her protests he tied her hands loosely behind her back with his saddle rope, then playing the rope out, took a blanket into the brush with his rifle.

Old Mike moved down to the springs and drank. Reck listened to the sounds made by the old dog. It had been foolish, perhaps, bringing the animal, but Doc Shanley had said Mike was the only thing he had ever cared for until Zoe came along.

Zoe's inviting voice came softly from the darkness. "I'm afraid here alone, Reck."

He made no reply. A faint sound somewhere on the back trail alerted him. He picked up the rifle, levered a shell into the firing chamber, the oiled mechanism making a lethal sound in the darkness. Old Mike had also caught the scent of trouble, for Reck could hear his low growl from the brush.

Reck got to his feet He had purposely chosen this

campsite above the road. Now he peered over the lip of a brushy cliff.

Zoe said, "There's somebody down on the road."

A man's voice angled sharply from the deep shadows fifty yards across the clearing. "Watch it, Corstain!"

Reck tried to pierce the darkness. Now he saw a dim shape on yonder cliff. But he was silent, sensing the man over there would shoot in the direction of his voice.

Zoe whimpered, "I'm scared."

"Shut up," Reck ordered softly.

The man yelled, "This is Mark Tooney. I followed you out of town, Corstain. There's a rider been trailing you. He's cut in back of your camp and he's somewhere in the brush behind you!"

Reck felt his hands perspire. He turned slowly, peering back up the slope. Nothing moved up there. The horses he had staked out whinnied, moved restlessly. Old Mike continued to growl. Tooney might be alone, Reck reasoned, or he might be with Trancas.

Reck swore softly. This was what came from being sentimental over an old dog. If they hadn't been forced to move slowly because of old Mike they now would be across the border.

Quickly he gauged his chances. Tooney might be honestly trying to warn him. Or he might be working with the skulker up on the hill. But why should Tooney side a Corstain? Reck, after all, had killed two men in his office and hit Tooney over the head with a gun barrel. It was not exactly the way to make friends with a man. Yet Tooney was after money. His letter to Zoe proved that. Reck decided to gamble. He couldn't stand here all night. If daylight caught him here on the slope he would be a goner. It had been his intention to snatch a few hours sleep then hit the trail before dawn.

Stooping, Reck groped in the darkness and found a stone as big as his fist. He tossed it a dozen yards to his left. A rifle smashed down from the slope, two shots that kicked up a geyser of sand. Zoe screamed. Almost before those two flashes of orange flame had winked out from

the brushy hillside, Reck was firing. He put three bullets into that brief flash of light, one in the center, one high and one low. He heard a man groan, the sound of a body falling into the brush.

Silence then. Old Mike was barking furiously and the horses danced at the short ends of their picket ropes.

From across the road Tooney's voice said, "Looks like you got him, Corstain!"

Reck was not sure. He had moved aside the instant he fired so Tooney would not have a line on his position from the sound of the shots. Then, upon hearing no movement above, he circled toward the spot where the rifleman had waited to kill him. Brush tore at his face. He edged forward, cautiously. He almost tripped over a yielding form on the ground. Drawing his belt gun he put out a hand. The man lay face down. The back of his shirt was wet and Reck knew one of the bullets had gone clear through.

He risked a match. In the momentary flare he saw a young face, vicious even in death. A curly-haired man who had crept up here to gun him down.

Reck saw with a start that the man's eyes were open, that a flicker of light still glowed in their depths.

"You got more lives than a cat, Corstain," the man said in a feeble voice. "I should've got you tonight at Doc Shanley's—"

He made a strangling sound in his throat, tried to rise, then fell back. Reck felt for a pulse. There was none. Slowly he made his way back to camp. "Come on up, Tooney!" he called. "But try any tricks and I'll kill you."

The moon had swung over the eastern rim of the Duarte Hills, flooding Rustler Pass with its light. Even with trail dust on his dark suit, Tooney looked immaculate, as if he had just stepped out of a Virginia City bath tub.

"I can't figure Trancas sending only one man after you," Tooney said when Reck had told him about the man on the hill. "Lucky I saw him pull out of town on your trail. I've been trying to figure out a way to warn you."

"Thanks," Reck grunted. "But I figured you'd be dealing with Trancas. Not me."

Tooney gave Zoe a warm smile. "I'm dealing with you and—Mrs. Corstain." Then the smile was gone. "That was foolish, letting Trancas know you still lived."

"I saw you in Bulwar's and thought you'd be selling information to Trancas. I decided to beat you at your own game." Reck stared at this lawyer-cafe owner. "Did you bring Ivis Drake to Apache?"

"Just a coincidence that she was on the same stage," he admitted. "A lot of people are coming to Apache. A railroad means money." Tooney smiled again. "I'm in this for the money."

"The Corstains are busted flat."

"Twenty thousand will be my share," Tooney said, ignoring Reck's statement.

"The price has gone up," Reck grunted. "In Virginia City you were going to deal with Glover for ten thousand."

Tooney shrugged. "I'm worth that to you."

"How?"

Reck had untied Zoe's hands. Now she sat on her blanket, her small oval face showing an unconcealed eagerness at this talk of money.

Tooney said, "I'm a member of the bar. I've been too concerned with running the Tivoli to maintain a legal practice. But I want you for a client."

"Keep talking," Reck said.

"There are enough legal loopholes in that Peter Lawson killing to get you an acquittal."

Reck laughed shortly. "Trancas would never let it get to court. In the second place I wouldn't trust you any farther than you can throw a shadow."

Tooney said, "You may have to trust me, Reck. There's forty thousand dollars missing from this valley—money used for the purchase of railroad stock. The story is that when Lawson learned you had cheated your neighbors, you were forced to kill him before he could reveal his information."

Reck frowned. "You've dug deep to learn all this."

"I also know why Glover was in Virginia City. He was trying to trace that forty thousand dollars. He thought somebody around the Exchange might have a line on it." He chuckled. "You see, Glover was also a greedy man."

"And Glover is dead," Reck reminded him sharply.

"I don't blame you for suspecting me," Tooney said. "But Trancas will have you jailed by noon. They made their plans in Bulwar's tonight. Trancas would have liked it if Luke Daniels could have killed you out here. Now he'll move swiftly. The only thing that has made Trancas cautious so far is the great change in you. Before, you were a coward. Now you've got them bluffed. Either that or you really have changed."

Zoe said, "He's changed. You can believe me on that."

Tooney said, "I don't blame you for coming back to Apache, Reck. With a wife like this—" His gaze lowered from her face to the swelling breasts her man's shirt could not hide. Zoe made no effort to button the top button that had come unfastened.

Reck, seeing this, said, "I'll have to teach my wife to keep her clothes on when there's another man around."

Angrily Zoe pulled the shirt tight across her bosom, held it there. "He's got the railroad stock you wrote me about, Tooney. He made me give it to him. You could make him give it up."

Reck said, "She'd like to see us fight. It's a gamble that you might kill me. Want to try?"

Tooney shook his head. "I saw you kill Wilder and Glover. I'd be a fool to try and match you."

Zoe spat, "You're nothing but a killer, Reck. You've gone loco in the head. Even tonight you killed a man." She flung a hand toward the slope where Luke Daniels lay sprawled in death.

"One of the men who murdered Doc Shanley," Reck said grimly. "At least I've partially cleared that debt. It'll be paid up in full when I kill Trancas." Reck got to his feet, drawing his gun.

Tooney also rose, spreading his hands. "What's the idea?"

"Get out of here, Tooney. Your law talk sounds good, but things have gone beyond that stage. Guns will do the talking now."

"I'll go with you."

"Like hell you will," Reck told him bluntly. "You'll clear out. And if I catch you on my backtrail you'll stay there—with a rock on your chest."

With no show of anger, Tooney got his horse and mounted. "You'll have need of me yet. Wait and see." Then with a lift of his hand, he spurred off into the darkness.

Even though Luke Daniels had been a killer, Reck could not leave his body for prowling coyotes. It took him half an hour to cover the body with rocks while Zoe and old Mike looked on. Zoe seemed to have a change of heart, for she bit her lip and said, "With that railroad stock we'd have plenty of money, Reck." She moved close to him, pressing her thigh against him. "Let's go away—together."

He gave her a tight grin. "You'd go with any man who had the price."

For an instant anger tightened her mouth. The sky had started to pale in the east and the first hint of dawn was in the hills.

He said, "One minute you hate me. The next minute—"

She stood watching him with her amber eyes, letting them slide over the length of his tall figure. "I didn't love you when you went away," she said, emotion making her voice tight. "But now it's different."

"You like a killer, don't you, Zoe," he told her as he brought up the horses. "Before I was a coward. Trancas caught your eyes because he was as cold-hearted as you are."

"That's in the past." She tilted back her head. "I'm your wife. And there's nobody here to watch us but two horses and an old dog." She stood like that with her body arched,

her breasts tight against the white shirt, her lips slightly parted.

He said, turning, "That railroad stock isn't worth ten cents."

Instantly she changed, peering at him intently. "It's worth a lot of money."

"Not unless a track is laid," he reminded her.

She laughed, at ease again. "You don't understand, Reck. The CSL crowd will pay plenty for that stock to get their hands on it."

"Who told you that?"

"Trancas."

Reck said, "What else did he whisper on those long nights while I was gone?"

"Forget the past," she told him, fighting her anger. "I thought you were dead. If Trancas and me—" she shrugged. "Well, I'm a woman."

"How was it with you and Trancas before you thought I was dead and buried?" Reck said softly. "Were you a woman then?"

She made one last try. "Sell the stock, Reck."

He shook his head. "Face it, Zoe. We're broke. We haven't a plugged peso between us."

"Goddam you, Reck!" she cried suddenly and tried to snatch up the rifle he had rested against a boulder. He caught her around the waist, whipping her up and over the saddle of her gray. She sat there, glaring down at him.

"Some day," Reck said as he mounted, "you'll learn there's more to life than the shine of a gold coin. Either that or you won't live to be very old. Your kind dies young."

At mid-morning a spiral of dust ahead alerted Reck and he seized the bridle of Zoe's horse and pulled it off the trail into a thicket. A dozen riders were just pushing through a break in the sandstone canyon ahead. Reck ordered Zoe out of the saddle. While he held the two horses to keep them from whinnying he told her to put

her two hands over old Mike's muzzle so he wouldn't bark.

Jube Canavan and his rustlers moved leisurely through the canyon. Reck got his first good look at the stooped horse thief, who rode hunched over in the saddle. Across one cheek Reck could see a fresh scar. Probably the one Tay Gillis cut into his face. At Canavan's side a beefy man rode with his left arm in a sling. That was likely Lou Talisman, the rustler Reck had shot that night when he tangled with the crew.

They were as disreputable a bunch of gun-hung rustlers as Reck had ever seen. He wondered where they were heading. More horses, probably. When they had gone he made Zoe mount again and they continued on their slow ride into Mexico. Old Mike trotted behind, his tongue lolling. Now and then Reck would pause and give him a drink from the canteen, filling an old coffee can he had picked up for the purpose.

For the rest of the morning Reck rode with one eye on their backtrail. With Jube Canavan in the vicinity they ran the risk of being spotted from a hilltop. Canavan had been carrying a pair of cavalry field glasses slung around his neck.

Canavan hated all Corstains. You couldn't blame him. Not after a Corstain had sent him to Yuma. Even though Zoe deserved little consideration for the life she had led, still no woman should be subjected to the kind of treatment Jube Canavan and his riders would furnish. Zoe, after all, was a Corstain.

It was late afternoon when they reached the adobe. Caballo, his pock-marked face impassive, yanked off his hat. "Welcome, *Señora,*" he grunted without enthusiasm, and led Zoe into the house.

Sam Corstain had been napping. Now he pulled his pants over his underwear. "Why'd you bring Zoe out here?" he demanded, turning his blind eyes on Reck. "She's nothin' but trouble."

Reck said, "You and Caballo keep her company. See

that she doesn't get lonesome for that fine house in town."

Caballo grinned. "She stay here. Till you say she can leave."

While Caballo warmed up a pot of *frijoles y carne* Reck took blankets into the bedroom. Part of the roof was gone. The blankets he dumped onto a broken-down old bed. He pointed to the hole in the roof. "Just pray that it doesn't rain," he told her bluntly.

"You expect me to stay in this filthy hole?" she cried.

"You're my wife. You'll stay where I put you."

She came to him then, suddenly burying her dark head against his chest. "You're the one who has forgotten I'm your wife. Take me away, Reck. Please."

He pushed her aside. "Tears won't do any good," he told her.

Angrily she swiped a forearm across her moist eyes. She bared her teeth when she said, "I'll get away from here. You won't be here all the time."

"Sam and Caballo will see that you don't leave."

"A blind man and a fat old Mexican," she scoffed. "A man will come riding by one of these days. And when he does, I'll smile at him and he'll do what I say."

She stood glaring at him defiantly, hands on her hips.

He said, "I guess you would at that—go with any man that came along. You're not better than a—"

"Say it, Reck," she cried. "Go ahead."

He turned from her in disgust.

In the yard, Sam Corstain said, "I don't want Zoe here."

"She's a Corstain. She's staying."

Sam Corstain fiddled with his cane. "You never talked that way to me before."

"A lot of things have changed. I was ready to ride out and leave you once. Doc Shanley changed my mind. Somebody murdered him. I've paid off part of the debt. But there's still Trancas."

Sam Corstain shifted his feet in the dust. "Too bad about Doc." Then he added, "One of Caballo's Mex friends come foggin' out from town last night. Said you

offered to shoot it out with Trancas but that he didn't have guts enough to pick up a gun."

Reck said, "It was the shock of seeing me alive that stopped Trancas. Next time he'll shoot before he talks."

"And you'll kill him," Sam Corstain said. He fumbled with his right hand until his fingers clutched Reck's shirt sleeve. "I had you pegged wrong. You're a fighter. We'll make every man in Apache wish he'd never seen daylight when the Corstains ride back to the flea-bit town!"

"We're going to do it my way, Sam. Or not at all."

For a moment Sam Corstain blinked his sightless eyes, the scars seeming to deepen on his face. "All right," he said, "but you'll need men. Go to Santa Rosa. You'll find a crew the Corstains can use. Ask for Miguel. You remember him."

"I remember nothing," the tall man reminded.

Sam Corstain nodded. "I forgot." He yelled for Caballo, and when the old Mexican shuffled up, Sam Corstain said, "Draw Reck a map. On the way to Santa Rosa he can see the treasure."

"The forty thousand?" Reck asked, his mouth tightening.

Sam Corstain shook his head and chuckled. "This treasure is goin' to be worth more to the Corstains than a wagon load of gold."

Caballo was hunkering down, making marks in the dust with a long, brown forefinger. "Leave the Santa Rosa trail at Zopolite," Caballo muttered. "Go west to the river. There you weel see it."

Reck straightened, eyeing Sam Corstain. "I figured you had a hole card somewhere."

"This is it," the blind man said, and laughed harshly.

CHAPTER TEN

A BRASSY Mexican sun beat against the back of Reck's shirt as he followed the Santa Rosa trail. At Zopolite, a queer formation of rocks that reminded a man of a gang of buzzards, Reck turned west. After a mile he could

smell the river and see the tangle of willow that fringed the bank. Riding his horse through the dense undergrowth with a hand on his gun, he suddenly pulled up. He was staring at what appeared to be huge mounds of iron. With his pulse quickening he pushed forward again. Now he saw Sam Corstain's treasure.

Hidden from any river steamer by the tangle of jungle was a train, set down in the middle of this desolation; a Francis & Jarrett wood-burning engine hooked to a freight car and passenger coach. Already rust had laid its dull red hand on the ironwork. Green vines had started to climb the wooden sides of the coach and freight car. In another few months the elements would complete their destruction.

Any elation Reck might have felt was suddenly dimmed. How did you get a train all the way to Apache without iron rails?

Where the sandy trail widened into a street, Reck came to Santa Rosa, a town of barking dogs and shacks made of ocotillo poles plastered with mud. Before an adobe cantina he pulled up, edging his lathered horse into a slot along a crowded hitch rail. He stepped inside.

It took a moment for his eyes to adjust themselves to the dim interior. He saw men at one end of the long bar give him a cursory inspection.

A fat bartender with a ring in his right ear said, "*Que es, compadre?*"

"Miguel?" Reck asked.

The man shook his head. "Miguel he go to Hermosillo."

Reck laid one of his coffin handles on the bartop. "That's worth two hundred and fifty dollars." His eyes were on the bartender, but his voice was for those shadowy faces at the rear of the cantina. "I'm paying top wages. This chunk of solid silver will be an advance to the kind of men I want."

A voice from the shadows said, "How much you pay-in'?"

"A hundred a month."

There was a shuffling of feet as men left the tables and crowded around the bar; silent men with the stamp of a hard trade in their eyes.

A tall, sandy-haired man with a jagged scar that made a crooked line against the tan of one cheek said, "A hundred a month sounds good."

"It is good," Reck told him.

One of the men said, "Maybe this is what we been waitin' for, Sandy."

Sandy Hillard rubbed his jaw, eyeing Reck. "We can't cross the border 'less we're ridin' for a big outfit. Somebody big enough to keep a sheriff off our tails."

"You'll ride for the Broken Wheel," Reck said.

Sandy Hillard turned his reckless blue eyes on this tall, sun-blackened man. His companions, in faded shirts and worn levis shuffled their feet. Their boots had been cut by too many cactus thorns, dried by too much Mexican sun. But the guns at their belts were freshly oiled.

Sandy Hillard said, "Who you tryin' to fool, partner? You reppin' for Lothar Trancas?" When Reck shook his head, Hillard said, "Trancas owns the Broken Wheel."

"Not for long. I'm repping for Reck Corstain."

For a moment Hillard was silent, then he laughed. His men joined in.

"Reck Corstain died with a rope around his neck," Hillard said.

"I'm Reck Corstain."

Sandy Hillard stared. "I'm sayin' you're a liar!"

Reck felt his nerves tighten. Deliberately he unbuckled his gun belt, laid it on the bartop. With unconcealed eagerness, Sandy Hillard put his own belted gun on the bar. He was grinning in anticipation. These were men who lived by violence. Too long they had been inactive in this stinking hole of Santa Rosa.

Before Reck could get his boots anchored firmly on the hard-packed dirt floor, Hillard smashed him in the face with a heavy fist. Reck struggled to free himself of the wiry arms that suddenly encircled him. Hillard was fast and he was tough. Reck had to give him fifteen

pounds in weight and two inches in height. As Reck broke free, Hillard's longer reach showed up to advantage. Two vicious jabs knocked Reck's head back.

Knowing he would fight here for his life, Reck hit the sandy-haired man a savage blow in the stomach, heard the whoosh of air that was expelled from Hillard's lips. When Hillard grabbed for his stomach, Reck hit him twice in the face.

In the harsh sunlight that poured through the open door, he could see the excitement in those eyes that watched him. Outside a man began yelling: "Fight!" Two Mexican girls suddenly appeared in a doorway that led to some back room at the far end of the bar.

Hillard's teeth were bared. One of Reck's blows had loosened a strip of skin on one high cheek bone. He came in swiftly. Reck tried to fight him off but his head still buzzed from Hillard's first blow between his eyes. He gave ground. Hillard struck him hard on that small white scar at his right temple. A bell began to clang in Reck's head. He knew he was falling. Instinctively he grabbed Hillard around the knees, pulling the man with him to the dirt floor.

Instantly they broke apart. Reck got to his knees, trying to clear his head. His vision was distorted. There were two Hillards. In him was a sudden desperation. These blows were bringing back those old headaches he had first experienced when he awakened from the past in that wagon with Ivis Drake.

A puma could not have come up off the floor quicker than Hillard. He charged, his wide shoulders tight against the pull of a gray shirt. This time Reck was waiting, squinting his eyes so as to get a clear picture of this sandy-haired man who was bent on stomping him into the floor.

Reck whirled, let Hillard go on past, then turned, chopping down with a hard blow to the man's ribs. A savage joy burst in him as his right fist cut the tip of Hillard's jaw. He had Hillard backing up, blinking his eyes, trying

to smear the blood from a cut cheek with the back of one hand.

"Tromp him, Sandy!" one of the men yelled.

"That I'll do," Hillard said through his teeth, and rushed again, both fists swinging.

Reck blocked one blow, took another high on the forehead. A white light burst in his head. He tried to grab Hillard, pull him close to give his head time to clear, but Hillard slammed a half dozen blows into his midriff. Reck gave ground, gasping for breath.

He seemed to be watching this fight from a distance. This couldn't be him. He could see the blows, but he couldn't feel them. Those fists slamming at him, smashing him in face and body. Like flies to be brushed off with a flick of the hand. Then he was aware that his own fists were finding targets. Hillard's face was suddenly blood-smeared. It was the yelling and the squeals of the Mexican girls that cleared Reck's head. With the clarity came the pain and the realization that he had to end this thing quickly or die.

Instinct had made him keep his guard up during those moments when his mind had been a blank. His arms ached from blocking those savage blows.

"You got him now!" a man yelled. "Finish him, Sandy!"

They wrestled the length of the barroom, and the men broke apart to give them room. They crashed into a table, spilling bottles and glassware. Catching Hillard off balance, Reck spun him with stunning force against the bar-lip. Dazed, Hillard hung there a moment.

Gasping for breath, Reck moved in. He caught the man twice on the jaw before Hillard tried to knee him. Ducking, Reck seized the knee, upset Hillard, then fell on him. Hillard gave him an elbow in the stomach, and rolled clear. This time the man did not get up so quickly. He staggered, breathing hard, blood running from his face onto his torn shirt.

If Reck failed here, all his plans would be finished. He knew he had to win. If he could not whip Hillard these men would never follow him, no matter how much

money he offered them. At the first opportunity they would double-cross him.

He grinned at Hillard through the torn mask of his face, and moved in. Hillard met him. They wrestled and punched and tried to use their knees. Now it was Hillard who groaned as Reck hit him a solid smash in the face, followed it up with two lefts to the rib box. Reck gasped for breath. If he couldn't down that swaying Hillard now he could never do it. There was little strength left in his arms. He drove Hillard back, caught a savage blow at the point of his chin. In that blind moment he realized he was hitting the sandy-haired man in the face, feeling knuckles against bone and flesh. Then from nowhere a fist hit him between the eyes.

Reck was knocked against the bar. He clung to the lip, feeling the strength go out of his knees. Helpless, he waited for Hillard to finish him off.

When his vision cleared he saw that Hillard lay on his back in the middle of the dirt floor. One of the men held a bottle of tequilla to Hillard's lips.

At a staggering run, Reck made the *cantina* doorway. He was sick. After a time the retching stopped and he turned back to the silent barroom.

Hillard was on his feet, grinning. "We settled one point," he panted. "You ain't a liar."

The bartender set up drinks, shaking his dark head over the wreckage of tables and chairs. The men lined the bar. The tequilla burned some of the tiredness from Reck. He met the rest of Hillard's crew, Charlie Miller, a square and solid man; Joe Channing, tall and stringy with a long red face.

Mike Dell, a hard-faced little man who walked with a swagger, said, "We can use a hundred a month, Sandy."

Sandy Hillard nodded. "We ain't a big outfit, but we're a tough one." He brushed a hand over his bruised jaw. "Looks like Trancas sure as hell made a mistake. He hanged the wrong man."

Reck said, "He hanged the right one. I'm just lucky to be alive so I can talk about it."

Sandy Hillard was silent a moment. "Maybe you won't want us."

"Why not?"

"We worked for Trancas once."

Reck's brows lifted. "Looks like it didn't work out or you wouldn't be hiding out in a hole like this."

Sandy Hillard chuckled. "He hired us to rustle stock."

"Doesn't surprise me a damned bit, knowing Trancas."

"Maybe this will surprise you. We used a running iron on Branler's JB and Art Henshaw's Spur and Grady Jones' Rail Seven. We blotched 'em into a Broken Wheel."

Reck's eyes narrowed. "That don't make sense."

"It was before Trancas took over the Broken Wheel. He wanted it to look like you Corstains was puttin' your brand on your neighbors' beef." Hillard leaned down and spat on the dirt floor. "He figured the valley would be against the Corstains, not that they wasn't already. But when Jube Canavan got let outa Yuma, he made the same proposition to that old horsethief. Sheriff Mendon swore out a warrant for us and we had to high-tail it."

"And Trancas never paid us a nickel," Charlie Miller grunted, shifting his solid bulk. "The damned swine."

Sandy Hillard gave Reck a direct look. "Them's our cards, Corstain. We was strangers around here, up from Texas. We takes a job that looks easy and pays good. And we wind up with a hole in our pockets where the money oughta be and a warrant for our hides. We was workin' against you." He took a long drink. "Maybe you changed your mind about hirin' us."

Mike Dell said, "We'd admire havin' a chance to nail Trancas to the fence. If you want to give us a try."

Reck studied the men a moment. Men who lived by their wits and their guns. There was little choice to be made.

"Boys," Reck said, lifting his glass, "let's drink to runnin' Trancas into the river."

The fat bartender gave Reck two hundred and fifty dollars for the coffin handle. "I give you the money," he

said, "not because I trust you, but because you are Reck Corstain. I have heard of the reputation of this Reck Corstain when he has a tough crew."

The bartender had spoken in Spanish. Reck turned to Hillard, saying, "What's he blabbing about?"

Hillard gave him a queer look. "I always heard tell the Corstains could speak Mex."

"One more thing I've forgotten to remember," Reck said dryly.

On the long ride to the adobe, pain was a constant pressure in Reck's head. The dull throb reminded him of those days with Ivis Drake when she had put her cool hands on his forehead. Thoughts of the blue-eyed girl made him more certain than ever that he wanted to see the finish of this thing. Then the futility of the whole thing weighed in him like a chunk of cold lead. What chance did he have with this slim crew?

When they rode into the yard, Zoe was in the doorway, a bold smile on her lips. Somehow Reck was reminded of those girls in the *cantina.*

Sandy Hillard said, "I didn't figure we'd have a queen in our crew."

Reck said, "She's Mrs. Reck Corstain."

Hillard said, "Oh," and gave Reck a quick appraisal with his blue eyes. But his gaze returned to Zoe. With a sway of the hips, she started carrying out plates of steaming food Caballo had cooked up. She smiled at the men, joshed with them. Reck frowned, seeing how their hungry eyes watched her. She would be trouble here. But it was too late now to regret bringing her to Mexico.

While the men started a monte game in the porch shade, Reck took old Sam Corstain down to the corral. "I saw the treasure you were talkin' about," he said, shaping a cigarette. "What's a rusty engine and two cars going to buy the Corstains?"

"Plenty."

Sam Corstain chuckled. Clutching his cane he told how he had taken some of his own money and purchased the train. Originally the train had been aboard a ship

bound for South America. At the mouth of the Colorado the ship had run aground. Hearing of the cargo, Sam Corstain took a river boat to the gulf and bribing the captain, brought the engine and two cars back up the river by flat boat to the spot where they now rested.

"That was six months ago," Sam Corstain said. "We got the train and two hundred feet of track."

"It'll take some doing to stretch that track clear to Nevada," Reck said dryly. Then he added, "It don't add up that you'd spend your own money for that engine and cars."

Sam Corstain gripped his cane in anger. "Any fool outa know that. By controlling the railroad I control the valley."

"And you figured to get your investment back by stealing that forty thousand in stock money from the stage."

Sam Corstain swore. "And that pig Trancas beat me to it."

Old Mike had waddled across the yard to sit beside Sam Corstain. He gave the old man's hand a tentative flick with his tongue.

For a moment Sam Corstain was thoughtful as he stroked the dog's grizzled head. "Funny how things change," he said. "Take this dog here. Before you went away he wouldn't let me touch him—not if you was close by."

Reck's mouth tightened. "What does that prove?"

Sam Corstain gave him a thin smile. "Don't prove nothin'. Nothin' at all." He turned his scarred face on Reck. "Old Mike must have like to tore the place down when you come home."

Reck said, "Everybody says I'm different. I guess the dog figures it the same way."

Sam Corstain pursed his lips. Abruptly he changed the subject. "You brung some good boys with you. I can tell by their voices. You can tell a lot by the way a man talks when you're blind." He put a hand on Reck's arm. "First thing is to get the Broken Wheel back from Trancas. You

can't lay a mile of track till that's done. And you ain't got much time."

When he returned to the house he caught Zoe and Sandy Hillard talking at the side of the house. Reck felt an edge of anger when he saw the way she smiled at the rustler. You couldn't blame Hillard. He jerked his head at Zoe. Giving Hillard a last smile, she went into the house.

"I want you to write a note to Trancas," he told her blunty.

She gave him a defiant stare. "You won't use me to bait him into a trap."

He caught her by the wrist. "If the Corstains win you can live in the big house again. If they lose, you and I can go to Santa Rosa. And if life gets too dull you can paint your cheeks and go to the *cantina.*"

He had not meant to say it, but her insolence and her mocking smile had unleashed his temper. His head still ached and his body was sore from the beating Hillard had given him.

For a long moment she glared at him, then shrugging a plump shoulder, she said, "I guess I'll have to stick with you whether I like it or not." She picked up a pencil and paper Reck had laid on a table. "What do you want me to write?"

He told her and when she had finished, he read over her shoulder:

> Dear Lothar: Meet me at our old place. It should be a beautiful night. The moon will be up and we can talk.
>
> Zoe.

"Better change it," he said. "Tell Trancas to bring his crew, because there's trouble afoot."

With a faint smile she obliged. When she had finished he gave the note to Caballo. Caballo knew a Mexican boy who would deliver the note to the Broken Wheel.

That night as they rode slowly toward the Broken Wheel, Sandy Hillard said, "There's a lot of female woman in that Zoe Corstain."

"I figure you noticed it," Reck said. "But don't let it get out of hand. Someday she's liable to get a man killed."

Sandy Hillard chuckled. "One thing at a time. Now it's Trancas we got to worry about. I want to see that son hangin' by his heels over a slow fire."

They were in the hills above the sprawling whitewashed ranch buildings when Trancas got the note. He quickly ordered up his crew and headed down the road to Apache. As near as Reck could tell, only three men had been left behind.

"Possession is nine points of the law," Reck said. "Here's where we prove it."

They moved slowly down the slant in the moonlight, hearing the clank of windmill gears, the restless stir of horses in the corral. There was nothing familiar to Reck in the big rambling ranch house. The Corstain sons had been born here, Doc Shanley had said.

Two of the Broken Wheel crew were in the bunkhouse, playing poker. The third, Sandy Hillard prodded up from the cook shanty at the point of his gun.

When they had the trio lined up against the bunkhouse wall with their hands lifted, Sandy Hillard said softly, "This is too easy. Just too damned easy."

Reck nodded, lifting a hand to his throbbing head.

Charlie Miller turned his square body. "Don't seem like Trancas is this big a fool when you stop to figure it out."

From the window, Trancas' harsh voice said, "You guessed right."

Reck lifted his gaze to the window where Trancas stood with a double barreled shotgun across the sill. Sandy Hillard smiled thinly, but a muscle quivered in his right cheek. Move now and Trancas' shotgun would blow them to pieces. The bunkhouse doorway was filled with Broken Wheel riders. There was nothing to do, Reck knew, but

raise his hands. Not unless he wanted to be cut down here by screaming buckshot.

When their guns were taken and they stood with lifted hands, Reck tried to figure how he had walked into this. If his head would only stop aching. A man couldn't think straight when every pulse beat was like an axe blade through his skull.

Lothar Trancas laid his shotgun aside and drew his belt gun. To Reck he said, "You forgot. Zoe is my woman, not yours."

"I might have known she'd double-cross me," Reck said through stiffened lips.

Trancas grinned, his teeth dazzling white in the lamplighted bunkhouse. "We've always had a code, Zoe and me. When she wrote: 'the moon will be up tonight' it meant that you would be around and it wasn't safe for us to meet. We had our little problems before you decided to come back from the grave."

Reck lifted a hand to his throbbing head. "I must have left my brains on the backtrail not to think that Zoe would trick me."

Trancas lost his smile and he rammed the muzzle of his gun hard against Reck's midriff. "This time I won't hang you against a shed wall. This time there'll be a gallows." Beads of moisture glistened on his dark forehead. "I don't know how you and Doc Shanley got you back to life, but it won't do anybody a damned bit of good. This time you'll really die."

Mention of Doc Shanley brought an instant reaction from Reck. "Shanley was the only decent thing in Apache. And you had him killed—"

Oblivious to the dozen men with drawn guns who encircled them, Reck leaped at Trancas. Before he had taken five steps, something smashed against the back of his head. He dropped to the floor, stunned. An awful fear rose in him. He couldn't move a muscle, but he could hear Trancas say, "Thanks, Bert. I only hope you didn't hit him too hard. I want him to walk to the gallows under his own steam."

Bert Hascomb, who had taken Tay Gillis' place as Broken Wheel foreman, sheathed his gun. He was a worried, ponderous man. "We got a bull by the tail, Trancas. Doc Shanley's lyin' was a bad move. A lot of folks are talkin' behind our backs."

"I'll do the worrying for this outfit," he snapped. He turned his cold eyes on Sandy Hillard, let them slide to Mike Dell and the blocky Charlie Miller. Joe Channing's perpetually red face was a little drawn. Trancas turned back to Hillard. "I ordered you out of Arizona. Why'd you come back?"

"For money. Why else." Hillard stood with his hands half raised, an insolent smile on his lips.

Trancas considered this a moment, then said, "When I told you I was kingpin around here you didn't believe me." He grinned faintly. "I could kill the lot of you, but that seems like a waste of time. So just one of you will die. That'll teach you a lesson and spread the word that Lothar Trancas is no man to fool with."

Silence thickened in the bunkhouse. Sandy Hillard's mouth tightened when Trancas picked up some shavings on the floor by a pot-bellied stove, broke them off at different lengths and held them in his hand. "Draw straws, boys," he ordered. "Short straw is the one that gets it."

Bert Hascomb's eyes were worried. In stature he was the biggest man in the crew, but he couldn't fill Tay Gillis' boots when it came to pure savagery. "You can't kill a man in cold blood," Hascomb blurted.

Trancas looked the big man over carefully. "You're only temporary foreman, Bert. We can change that any time."

A lank kid with a mean eye and a crooked grin stepped forward. Link Dover was his name and in this moment he saw a chance to strengthen his own position in Trancas' eyes. "Go ahead, boss. I'll handle Bert if he gets chicken-hearted."

Trancas eyed the kid a moment, then nodded. Sandy Hillard and his men drew straws. It was the blocky Charlie Miller who got the short one. He turned gray around the mouth.

For a moment he stared at the straw, then he laughed raggedly. "Some joke, huh, Trancas?"

When he moved for the door, the Broken Wheel men moved silently aside. Most of them were as hard as that wild-eyed kid, Link Dover. But some of them patently had no stomach for this.

Reck had begun to stir on the floor. Now he sat up, blood from the cut on his scalp, streaming over his neck. "You can't get away with this, Trancas," he warned.

Charlie Miller was across the threshold, walking toward his horse tied at the corral fence. With an unconcealed eagerness, Trancas lifted his gun, sighted down the barrel and shot Miller between the shoulders. As Miller started to pitch forward, Trancas shot him again in the back of the head.

In a terrible voice, Sandy Hillard said, "Trancas—"

Climbing shakily to his feet, Reck said, "Forget it, Sandy. You've got a chance. Ride for it. Your part in this is through."

For a moment Sandy Hillard stared at his blood-smeared face. Then without a word he stalked out the door, followed by Joe Channing and Mike Dell. For a long moment Reck thought Trancas would order them shot. But the dark man made no move to lift his gun. Carefully avoiding Charlie Miller's crumpled body, the three men swung into the saddle and cut south toward the border.

Now Trancas turned, grinning. "Now it's your turn, Corstain. Tie him up, boys!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

FROM HIS CELL in the Apache jail, Reck heard Trancas address the crowd that had quickly gathered when news that Corstain had been captured spread through the town.

"This time Reck Corstain will really hang," Trancas cried. "He can't shoot Peter Lawson in the back and

scalp Tay Gillis. On top of that he stole your money. Money you paid for railroad stock."

The crowd muttered its approval.

Later, Reck heard Trancas and Sheriff Mendon talking in the jail office. "I want a barbecue at Grant's Park. I'm going to pay for it. And I want that girl—what's her name—Drake. I want her to sing. This will be a fiesta. Free whisky for the men, gifts for the women and kids. I want the word spread around. It's goin' to be a celebration when Reck Corstain swings tomorrow."

It was an hour after sunup that Reck heard Mark Tooney's sharp voice in the jail office. After a moment the sheriff said worriedly, "Trancas won't like this."

Tooney's voice was amused. "If I can't see my client, there'll be a U. S. Marshal here one day to ask you some questions."

The sheriff's tone changed. "All right. But don't try any funny business with Corstain."

"I'm a lawyer, not a magician. It would take some doing to get him out of this jail."

Sheriff Mendon, his hair freshly plastered to his skull with a liberal spread of pomade, gave Reck a worried glance. He didn't unlock the cell door, but allowed Tooney to talk to his client through the bars. After the sheriff had gone, Reck said, "What brings you here, Tooney?"

"You're my client. I'm a lawyer."

"You're a saloon keeper."

Tooney, looking as immaculate as ever in his black suit and snowy white shirt, put a finger across his lips. "Nobody down here has to know that I've been disbarred." Then his eyes began to shine. "I've come here to talk business."

"There's no business with a Corstain. I hang tomorrow. It's all set. A quick trial, a quick rope."

Tooney lowered his voice, gripping the bars with his long fingers. "You can build a railroad."

"Trancas is your man."

"Trancas is a thief," Tooney said, his hazel eyes hard

against the prisoner's battered face. "I feel you may be a lot of things, Reck, but you'll deal a square game in spite of what they say about you."

Reck gave Tooney a queer look, then laughed harshly and gingerly pressed the cut on his scalp. "You'd be surprised what a man can walk into. A babe in the woods. That's me."

Puzzled, Tooney said, "Quit talking in riddles. We've got important things to discuss."

"Such as?"

"They have little case against you on that Peter Lawson matter. Trancas knows it, otherwise he wouldn't have lynched you before—or tried to. He'd have let the case go to court. But now the people are worked up more than ever against you. That Gillis matter didn't help."

"I didn't scalp Gillis," the prisoner said wearily. Then, rising from his cot, he said, "How much money will it take to get me out of this?"

"Twenty thousand. Half of the forty the Corstains stole in that stage robbery."

Reck shrugged. "There's another side to that story. The Corstains haven't got a double eagle between 'em."

Tooney said, "I won't enjoy seeing you hang. I don't like Trancas making a fiesta out of this."

"Neither do I," Reck said grimly.

Tooney spread his hands. "I'm not much, Corstain, but I have a few scruples. I'm playing for big stakes, however. The Tivoli was making no money, so I'm gambling on you. Trancas will have me shot before I get a dozen miles out of town for my part in this—if we fail. So my gamble is as great as yours."

Reck stared at the thin, aristocratic features. "I could tell you a long story, Tooney. Doc Shanley said that if I ever regained my memory, it would be sudden. Now I remember the whole story—the past—everything."

Tooney scowled, then said, "Your memory is your own business. What concerns you now is the present. What about our proposition?"

Reck said, "I can't promise you twenty thousand. But

I'll promise you half of every nickel I get out of the Great Southwestern."

Tooney looked thoughtful a moment, then said, "The CSL is going to fight any attempt of yours to lay track."

Suddenly Reck seemed to lose the grim certainty of his doom. "Get me out of here," he whispered. "We'll whip the CSL. And we'll whip Trancas, and you'll have your money."

Sheriff Mendon jerked open the door of his office and said, "Time's up."

Tooney said very formally, "I'll do my best for you, Mr. Corstain. But there's not too much hope."

Deputy Sheriff Jody Keenan sat in the jail office with his long legs propped up on the desk. It rankled him that Sheriff Mendon always had the fun out of this job, such as making arrangements for the hanging, passing out cigars in Bulwar's and getting free whisky. Whenever there was something dirty to handle, Jody got it. Like sitting here now while folks were streaming into town for the barbecue. Long on muscle and thin in the brain, Jody Keenan was bitterly contemplating his fate when he heard a light step in the doorway, and looking up saw a tall, well-formed girl with a mass of coppery hair coiled up on her head. As she stepped into the office, he recognized her instantly as that singer, Ivis Drake.

Instantly Jody was on his feet, grinning.

Ivis, looking around the small, cluttered office, said, "I thought Sheriff Mendon was here."

Jody scowled. "He's over at the courthouse. Trial starts at two. We figure to get the hanging over before dark so's Trancas can start the barbecue."

Ivis winced. Despite the early morning heat, she wore a heavy green cloak. She put her hands in the cloak pockets, smiling brightly up at the dim-witted deputy.

"I've always wanted to see a real bad man. Let me take a look at Corstain." She started for a door that evidently opened to the cells behind the office.

Keenan caught her by the arm. "Ain't allowed, Ma'am," he said.

Ivis pouted; she stepped close to Jody, fingering a button on his shirt. Instinctively Jody Keenan lifted his hands to her, thinking there might be some fun for him this day, after all. But Ivis danced lightly aside. "Let me take one look at Corstain," she begged.

Jody speculated a moment. "For a kiss?"

The girl let her bright eyes run the length of his figure. Then she said, "You'd better close the door."

Chuckling in anticipation, Keenan turned to close the door. He just had the door shut when he heard a jangle of keys. He turned, seeing the Drake woman had taken the cell keys from their wall peg. Something hard rammed him in the back.

Ivis Drake, a moment ago looking as if she wanted to be kissed, now had a sort of desperation in her eyes. "Get in the back," she ordered tensely, "or I'll kill you!"

Reck felt anticipation rise in him as they came down the narrow corridor, Keenan marching in front, his hands raised. Behind him was Ivis Drake's slim figure. The girl was unusually calm, but her mountain-blue eyes betrayed her inner tension.

"Stay back from him, Ivis," Reck warned as he saw the deputy's mouth tighten. "He may try to jump you."

The girl backed up, holding her small revolver in a steady hand. "If he tries anything, I'll shoot him."

Keenan was flat against the cell door now and reaching through the bars, Reck pulled his gun from its holster. Then ordering the sweating deputy aside, Reck said, "Unlock the door, Ivis. Hurry. Somebody may come alone any minute."

She got the door open finally. Reck ordered the deputy into the cell. He was going to tear up a blanket to gag and bind him when horses suddenly moved alongside the jail. Ivis Drake's face lost color. She stood rigid, her breasts tight against the gray fabric of the dress she wore beneath the cloak.

A man yelled, "Hey, Keenan. I got grub for the prisoner."

Reck felt sweat break out at the back of his neck. "Answer him," Reck whispered, ramming his gun muzzle against the deputy's ribs.

"Put it on the desk," Jody Keenan said.

Ivis had moved quickly up the hall to close the corridor door. They waited, hearing a tray thump to the desk, the clatter of dishware. "You all right, Keenan?" the man said through the door.

Reck jammed hard with the gun. Keenan said, "Hell, yes, I'm all right."

The man left the office. They heard the sounds of his horse as he started to move away from the jail. It was then that Ivis cried: "Look out!"

Reck spun, seeing that Keenan had snatched up a three legged stool and was intent on braining him with it. Reck sidestepped, brought the barrel of his gun across the top of Keenan's head. The deputy dropped silently to the stone floor.

It was only the fact that the jail was at the far end of Main Street with no nearby buildings, that enabled Reck and the girl to make their escape in broad daylight. Before leaving the jail, Reck had taken a handful of cartridges and Jody Keenan's hat. Just as they stepped outside, a buckboard clattered by in the street: a rancher and his family coming into town for the celebration. The rancher swung his gaunt face toward the jail a moment, giving the man and the woman there a cursory inspection. But Reck had his head turned, as if lighting a cigarette against the breeze that stirred the hot, dust-laden air.

When the buckboard had gone, Reck saw Sheriff Mendon stepping out of the courthouse with white-whiskered Judge Tolliver. They stepped briskly along the walk toward the jail. Reck took Ivis by the arm, hurried her behind the jail.

There, she shed her cloak. Then handing Reck the revolver she had used on Keenan, she calmly caught the

hem of her gray dress and while Reck looked on, open-mouthed, she pulled the dress over her head. She stood fully clothed in boy's shirt, levis and boots.

Despite the danger, Reck could not suppress a grin. She had brought two horses. When she threw the dress behind a rain barrel, she mounted nimbly. They moved east out of town, slowly so as not to attract attention. A thousand questions hammered at Reck, but he remained silent. They were not yet out of the woods and he had to keep his wits about him. With his face shadowed by the big brim of Keenan's hat, they gained the flat country beyond the town.

A quarter of a mile up the road, Tooney was waiting, sitting his horse, a rifle held across his saddle pommel. Noticing the suspicious set of Reck's features, Ivis said, "It was Tooney who got the horses for us."

Reck nodded to the saloonman-lawyer. Today Tooney wore a gray suit and white hat. He looked like a Frisco dandy, incongruous in this rough country.

Suddenly they heard excited yells from the jail and Reck knew that Jody Keenan had regained consciousness. It wouldn't be long before the whole countryside would be looking for Reckland Corstain. This time when they caught him it would be a quick and final noose.

As they skirted a fringe of the Duarte Hills on their way to the adobe hideout below the border, they suddenly ran headlong into three riders pounding along a sandy trail that led between towering sandstone cliffs.

Instantly Reck spotted them as Broken Wheel riders with the bright-eyed, curly-haired Link Dover in the lead. The other two Reck had seen with Trancas at the Broken Wheel ranch house; a rangy, black-bearded man named Donovan and an albino Trancas had called Clint DeWitt.

At sight of Reck Corstain riding hell-bent for the border in the company of a woman and a thin man in a white hat, the Broken Wheel riders swung their horses into a tight circle and started digging for their guns.

"Head for the rocks!" Reck shouted at Ivis and with

outflung hand indicated a shoulder of granite at the canyon entrance.

As dust boiled up from churning hoofs Reck saw Ivis reach the nest of rocks. Only then did he turn to the grim business at hand. There hardly had been time for him to draw a quick breath between the moment he saw the three riders and the moment he snapped up his gun.

This was no time for fancy gunwork, he knew. It was drop your hammer first or be killed. Instinctively he lined his sights on the black-bearded Donovan. The towering Broken Wheel rider was trying to swing up his rifle. Reck's shot caught him in the neck, driving the man in a somersault off the rump of his skittish horse.

As Reck swerved his mount so as not to trample Donovan's prostrate form, he saw that Mark Tooney had put distance between them. It was smart, so that the remaining pair of Broken Wheel men couldn't concentrate their fire. Tooney was firing at Clint DeWitt. The first shot missed. DeWitt, trying to manage a frightened horse, made a poor target. Tooney's next bullet struck its mark. The albino fell heavily against the saddle horn, tried to keep his seat, but the squealing bay he rode pitched him off in two jumps.

In sudden desperation at seeing his two companions down, Link Dover fired so close to Reck's face that Reck could feel the wash of the bullet against his cheek. That lethal breath against his face tightened Reck's nerves. As Dover frantically realized he had missed and was trying to rectify his mistake with another shot, Reck caught him in the shoulder. Dover squealed and with one arm dangling, tried to make it to the flats beyond the canyon mouth. Reck spurred his horse, caught Dover's mount by the bridle.

There was no eagerness for the kill in Link Dover now. While Tooney kept him covered, Reck looked over those two sprawled bodies in the dust.

"Dead," he grunted, "both of 'em."

Ivis rode out of the rocks. Her mouth trembled when she tried to smile at Reck. In levis and shirt, with her

coppery hair loose about her shoulders, she looked like a kid. Not like a woman who could face an audience of toughs in some mining camp and charm them with her voice.

Link Dover tried to snarl. "Trancas will kill you for this."

Reck shrugged. "He will if he catches me." He cocked his gun. "I want you alive, Dover. To talk. But don't press me too far."

After back-tracking and covering their trail as well as they could, the trio with their prisoner finally reached the adobe. When they topped the rise above the Corstain hideout, Reck smiled grimly. He recognized those three horses in the corral.

Sandy Hillard was sitting on the porch with Zoe. Neither the man nor Zoe Corstain showed any surprise that he still lived.

Hillard drawled, "We was trying to figure a way to get you loose from Trancas. Reckon we don't have to worry about that now."

Joe Channing and the half-pint Mike Dell were playing monte with Caballo. They lifted their hands to Reck and turned back to their game.

Reck sensed the men keenly felt the death of Charlie Miller and blamed him for the trap that had closed in on them back at the Broken Wheel. Even though they had heard Trancas admit it was Zoe who had betrayed them, it was hard to believe ill of a woman like her.

Zoe glared at Ivis, saying, "Why'd you bring *her* out here?"

Reck made no reply. When blind old Sam Corstain heard the story of the jail break, he chuckled. "I figured I wasn't wrong in puttin' my money on you."

Reck's lips twisted in a bitter smile. "That's a funny way for a man to talk about his son."

The old man flung up his gray head, staring in the direction of Reck's voice with his scarred eyes, but he made no reply.

Later, when they had eaten and untied Link Dover so he could get at a plate, Ivis walked down to the corral with Reck. Zoe's jealous amber eyes followed them.

At the corral fence, Ivis said, "When I first thought you'd scalped that man Gillis, I didn't want to see you again. I've heard some horrible stories about the Corstains."

"What changed your mind?" Reck asked her bluntly.

"It was my intuition, I guess," she said, watching him with her deep blue eyes. "I just couldn't believe those stories about you."

He took her hands in his own. "There's a lot to tell you, Ivis. Trust me a little while longer. You'll know the whole story when this is over."

She gave him a sharp glance. She had washed the dust from her face and combed her long, coppery hair. She lifted a hand to the gash on his head left by Trancas' gun barrel.

"I have a strange feeling, Reck," she said, "that you're remembering the past. That your memory has returned."

Grimly he said, "I remember—everything."

At the harsh note in his voice her blue eyes clouded. But although she pressed him for an explanation, he refused to give it.

At sundown Reck ordered the two women to stay in the adobe. With the wounded Link Dover in tow, the men gathered behind the shed. Reck drew his revolver, cocked it.

"I'm not goin' to fool around with you, Dover," he said. "Because we haven't got much time."

A faint line of sweat broke out on Dover's thin upper lip as he stared in fascination at that gun. The snarl and the cockiness was gone. He had no Lothar Trancas to back him up now.

Reck said, "A lawyer named Peter Lawson came to Apache. He was shot in the back. Who did it?"

While Link Dover wet his lips, Tooney gave Reck a sharp glance. "Everybody claims you shot him. If your

memory's gone like you say, how do you know the story isn't right?"

Reck rammed the gun muzzle against Link Dover's ribs. "Tell you about that—later." Now his eyes hardened against Dover's face. Although he had no intention of killing a man in cold blood, Dover didn't know that. Reck said, "How about it, Dover? Your life in exchange for the name of the man who killed Peter Lawson."

Link Dover looked at the circle of hard faces and hugged his wounded arm as if that would give him some immunity. "How do I know you won't kill me even if I tell," he blurted.

Reck gave him a tight smile. "The word of a Corstain don't mean much around here, but you'll have to take it."

Sam Corstain swore suddenly and slammed the end of his cane against the shed wall, making a sharp sound in the twilight stillness. He glared at Reck, saying, "You're getting damned handy with your insults to the Corstains!"

"The Corstains will bear up under it," Reck said calmly to the blind old tyrant.

Mark Tooney and the others gave Reck and the old man a puzzled glance.

But Link Dover, believing this to be part of a plan to confuse him, suddenly blurted out his story. "It was Tay Gillis that killed Lawson!" he cried suddenly.

Now that Dover had started, there was no stopping him, telling in detail how Trancas planned to murder the lawyer and blame it onto Reck. It would be the excuse he needed to get rid of Reck and forever throttle the power of the Corstains in the valley. With Reck dead and Sam Corstain broke and blind his plan would be complete.

That evening Link Dover wrote out his confession, but when he learned they intended to take him into town, he began to weaken. "Trancas will kill me," he wailed, but his protests did not sway them.

When they got ready to ride, Reck called Ivis out to the corral. "You stay here. It won't be safe for you in Apache. They'll jail you for helping me escape."

She gave him an odd little smile, saying, "I'll try and get along with your wife."

As Reck made ready to ride he saw that Sandy Hillard was staring back at Zoe, who stood in the lamplighted doorway. Zoe gave him a bold smile and when she saw Reck watching her, the smile froze and she glared. Sandy Hillard, sensing Reck's eyes on his back, turned abruptly and led the cavalcade at a brisk trot into the Mexican darkness.

Sam Corstain had wanted to ride with them, but Reck was giving the orders. Meekly Sam Corstain agreed to stay behind with Caballo and the women. If Tooney and the others noticed a change in the old hellion, they gave no outward evidence of it.

It was some hours later that they rode silently out of the Duarte Hills above Joe Branler's JB ranch. There they halted. Reck faced Tooney saying, "Sandy Hillard and his boys were hired by Trancas to rustle stock and put the blame on the Corstains. So Branler would likely shoot them on sight. You know what he'll do when he sees me." He leaned over in the saddle, touching Mark Tooney on the arm. "It's up to you," he told the lawyer. "Ride in and give him the lay of the land."

It was half an hour later that Joe Branler and his lanky foreman, Dave Quimby, rode up with Tooney. Branler only grunted a greeting and looked suspicious until he had read Link Dover's confession by the flare of a cupped match. When, at Reck's insistence, Dover repeated orally what he had written, Branler's brown beard seemed to tremble as the cowman began cursing.

"I've had damn little use for the Corstains," Joe Branler said, "since the old man tried to build that railroad of his. But this sure as hell puts another card in the deck." He twisted around in the saddle to regard Reck steadily.

"What you aim to do now?"

"I aim," Reck said with a faint grin, "to build a railroad."

CHAPTER TWELVE

JOE BRANLER took a cheroot from his cigar case, bit off the end and chewed it for several moments, studying Reck all the while. "Layin' in a coffin sure as hell put some sense in you, Reck. I admire to hear you want to go ahead with the railroad. But you got little time. Hemphill and his CSL crowd will grab the right-of-way. You got a deadline to meet and how the hell are you goin' to lay track all the way from here to Nevada in the little time you got left?"

"Mark Tooney has the savvy to find a loophole in that Great Southwestern contract. I'm betting that he can do it."

Tooney grinned suddenly in the darkness. "If it's there I'll find it."

After a night spent in the JB bunkhouse, Reck led them into Apache. He had Link Dover in tow, with Branler and Tooney flanking him. Behind came Hillard and his men, and then Dave Quimby and half the JB cowhands bringing up the rear. The few early risers in town stared in disbelief. Before Reck had traveled the length of Main Street to the jail building, men were popping their heads out of windows, or standing in doorways with suspenders trailing. A woman shouted from a second-story window, "There's Reck Corstain, ridin' free as you please! Somebody get the sheriff!"

But nobody stopped them, and when they swung down at the rail in front of the squat Apache jail, Joe Branler said, "One thing you forgot, Reck. What about that forty thousand dollars?"

Reck gave him a tight smile, prodded Link Dover out of the saddle. "I figure Dover can put us straight about that," and from the frightened look on the Broken Wheel rider's face, he knew he was right. "Dover was probably with Trancas when they raided the strong box here in town before it was even put on the stage."

Sheriff Tom Mendon had been eating breakfast in the

hotel dining room when he heard the news. He came running up the street, his napkin still tucked under his chin. "Good work, Branler," he panted, "I'll see you get a reward for capturing Reck Corstain—"

Joe Branler said, "You got a lot to learn, Sheriff."

When he had read the confession in the jail office, Sheriff Mendon ran a nervous hand over his slicked-down hair. Link Dover kept whimpering that Trancas would surely kill him, but no one paid him any attention.

The big deputy, Jody Keenan, leaned a shoulder against the wall, absently rubbing his head while he glared at Reck, as if in memory of the down-sweeping gun barrel that had laid him low.

Sheriff Mendon chewed his underlip when Branler suggested a warrant be sworn out for Trancas. The sheriff saw a way out when he said, "Gillis murdered Peter Lawson. And Gillis is dead."

"There's also a little matter of forty thousand dollars," Reck said coldly.

Sheriff Mendon seemed to find a reserve of courage when he said suddenly, "You ain't got proof of anything against Trancas. It's Dover's word against his."

Reck shrugged, smiling softly at Mendon. "Just lock Dover up and worry about the rest of it later. There's just one more thing. The irregularity of that sheriff's sale of the Broken Wheel."

"Irregularity," Mendon blustered. "I don't savvy what you mean."

Reck said, "With Reck Corstain dead and Sam Corstain blind and maybe buried, for all you knew, there wasn't much that could go wrong."

Sheriff Tooney brushed a hand across his perspiring forehead. "It was all done legal," he said in a weak voice.

Mark Tooney, an amused smile on his lips, said, "I'll take care of it for you, Reck."

Sheriff Mendon glared at the thin, aristocratic man. "Just what the hell you got to do with this?"

"I'm a lawyer," Tooney said quickly, "and I'm representing the Corstain interests."

Sheriff Mendon seemed to feel himself trapped, for he blurted, "It was all Trancas' idea."

Jody Keenan suddenly stepped away from the wall. "Shut up," he ordered the sheriff. "Trancas will take care of this bunch."

Reck stared at the deputy, saying, "Trancas may try to take care of us. But it'll take some doing."

After seeing Link Dover safely locked up in a cell, Reck and the others threaded their way through a silent crowd that lined both sides of the street. The story of Link Dover's confession had already been spread by those who had listened outside the jail office.

At the small building owned by the late Doc Shanley, Reck halted. He stared at the sign on the window, proclaiming this to be the headquarters for the Great Southwestern Rail Road. Trancas had never gotten Doc to remove that sign, but Sam Corstain's name as president had been scraped off. Inside the small office, Reck saw a desk and two chairs and a map of the territory on the wall.

"Well, boys," he said grimly. "We're in business."

By noon the news that Reck Corstain had not murdered Peter Lawson had swept the countryside. But more astounding was the revelation that he intended to proceed with construction of the Great Southwestern line to connect with the Nevada Central.

Reck took Mark Tooney out to the Corstain house. In the shed he dug up the stock certificates and a copy of the contract.

At sight of the stock certificates, Tooney whistled softly.

"I'm not trusting you to the end of the rope," Reck told him grimly. "Get any ideas of selling out to Trancas and I'll kill you."

Tooney gave him a tight smile. "That's a hell of a beginning. A client suspicious of his lawyer."

Outside, Reck stared at the shed wall where Trancas had hanged him. He felt a shiver, for it was the first time he had seen it by daylight.

Back at the office, Tooney spent the rest of the afternoon going over the contract while Reck rolled and smoked a sack of tobacco. At last Tooney shoved back tiredly from the desk, rubbed his eyes. "I think I've found that loophole you've been hoping for," he said. "These territorial lawyers take a lot for granted."

Reck put both hands flat on the desktop. "Cut it thin, Tooney. What's the deal on this?"

Tooney folded the contract, stared up at Reck. "You'll have your railroad," he said. "But just for the hell of it, tell me again how much I get out of this."

"Half of anything I get," Reck said impatiently, then added, "Like Dover, you'll have to take my word."

Tooney gave Reck's leather-brown face a searching glance. "I wouldn't believe a Corstain if he kissed the cross. But I'll believe you."

Reck's gray eyes hardened suddenly. "Why don't you finish it?" he said softly. "Let's hear what you've got on your mind."

Tooney shrugged beneath his gray coat. "Plenty of time for that. And besides, who cares?"

When Tooney stepped out to Bulwar's Saloon to get a drink, Reck rode to the Corstain house and reburied the stock certificates in the shed. It wasn't that he mistrusted Tooney, he just couldn't afford to take any chances.

When he returned to the office Bernard Hemphill had his plump figure wedged into the swivel chair, thumbs hooked in the pockets of his brocaded vest. Reck jerked his head in a perfunctory greeting. Hemphill's well-fed face told Reck nothing. The man puffed on a cigar, blowing smoke to the ceiling as if waiting for Reck to ask why he was in the office. When Reck busied himself with some papers on the desk, purposely goading Hemphill by this means, the CSL man finally stirred in the chair.

Peering up at Reck, the cigar clenched in his teeth, he said, "So far you've been damned lucky, Corstain. But your luck won't hold."

"You're sure about that?"

Hemphill's jowls reddened. "I dislike violence. That's the only reason Trancas hasn't brought his crew into town and wiped you off the face of the earth."

Reck said, "You came here to tell me that?"

Hemphill's small eyes studied Reck's face. The railroad man said, "You claiming to lay track before the deadline is so much poppycock, and you know it." When Reck only gave him a tight smile, Hemphill added, "The CSL intends to have the only track in this valley."

"Other people may have something to say about that."

"You persist in this plan of yours and there'll be bloodshed," Hemphill warned.

"It's a little late to think of that."

Tooney, smelling of cloves, entered the office from Bulwar's. He sat down on a corner of the desk and smiled at the scowling Bernard Hemphill.

Hemphill swung his angry eyes from Tooney to Reck. "Do you think Trancas is going to let you get away with this, Corstain? He stands to gain a lot if the CSL lays track here. He's not going to stand aside and let you beat him." His jowls trembled in anger as he said, "You're whipped before you start."

Reck gave Mark Tooney a slow smile. "Any idea why Hemphill is stinking up our office with his cigar and his talk? Why doesn't he let us bang our heads against a wall instead of pointing out how tough it's going to be for us."

The lawyer, catching something from Reck's metal gray eyes, said, "I've got a hunch he's also spotted that loophole in the contract."

Hemphill's angry snort told them the guess was correct. The CSL man jerked to his feet. "I'll give you five thousand in cash to clear out."

Reck turned to Tooney. "It's up to you. Will twenty-five hundred be enough?"

Mark Tooney shook his head. "For that kind of money I'd have stayed in Virginia City." The lawyer said quietly, "Tell him to go to hell, Reck."

Knowing he had to move swiftly, the following day

Reck put in an order at the livery for all the mules that could be rounded up. At the mercantile he and Tooney purchased all the heavy cable in stock.

When Murd Suttlemeier, owner of the mercantile, shook a bony fist under Reck's nose and demanded payment in advance, Reck said, "You own stock in the Great Southwestern. You've got nothing now, but string with us and you may own a piece of a railroad."

Although he had been cleared of Peter Lawson's murder, the townspeople had hated the Corstains too long. Therefore, when Reck moved down the crowded boardwalks, men gave him plenty of room. No one spoke, yet neither was there any open show of defiance.

It worried him that Trancas had made no move against him. He would have much preferred a showdown now. But Trancas was apparently staying close to the Broken Wheel.

Sandy Hillard said that night when they rounded up the mules and loaded the cable into a wagon, "'You're loco, Reck. You can't fight Trancas like this."

But Reck assured him he knew what he was doing. As they moved out of town with the wagon and mules, Reck knew it was too easy, like the time he had tried to take over the Broken Wheel. A tremor of fear set his nerves to jumping as they moved toward the border in the thickening darkness. Joe Branler and his men, with the exception of Dave Quimby, were staying in town to guard the jail in case Trancas decided to eliminate Link Dover's testimony with a bullet in the head.

Reck had insisted that Quimby accompany them for the lanky JB foreman had perked up his ears at mention of a steam engine and two cars off in the Mexican jungle somewhere. Quimby had once worked as a railroad fireman in his youth back in Ohio.

"I'm glad there's one of us who knows a steam valve from an ox bow," Reck had said grimly.

At sunup they reached the spot in the river jungle where Sam Corstain's train lay rotting under the Mexican sun. At sight of the rusting engine and two cars, Sandy

Hillard shook his head. "You'll never get that outfit to roll," he said dismally.

When the mules had been picketed, Rack tried to fight down the pessimism Sandy Hillard's words had injected into his mind. What madness had prompted him to think he could move this train to Apache, Reck asked himself. A path would have to be cut through the thick willows. Wind had piled river sand high around the trucks and would first have to be shoveled aside.

Dave Quimby had climbed into the cab of the wood-burning engine. Reck followed him up the rusting iron ladder, watching Quimby fuss with valves and the Johnson Bar.

After a cursory inspection, Quimby's Adam's apple bobbed in his scrawny neck when he said excitedly, "She ought to run. If the boiler ain't rusted through."

Beside the train was stacked a pile of rusting rails. Not more than two hundred feet, Dave Quimby said upon making a hurried estimate with his eyes.

Sandy Hillard stood flanked by Dell and Joe Channing. The red-haired man shook his head dubiously. "You'll never move this outfit with mules," he said. "She'll bog down inside of ten feet. Sand's too deep."

Knowing uncertainty was contagious, Reck forced a grin and started to work. They set about unloading timbers from the wagon. Soon the sound of hammers on spikes echoed in the river jungle. It took them a full day to build a long sled-like affair with two runners.

When this was done, they fitted timbers around the bottom of the engine, locking them in place with cables. They cut willow logs for rollers, and digging trenches forced them beneath the engine and cars.

When the task was completed they sank to the ground in the scant shade afforded by the jungle growth. Even Dave Quimby seemed to have now lost some of his enthusiasm.

"From where I sit," the lank foreman said morosely, "it looks like all I'll get out of this deal is a sore back."

Joe Channing's long red face reflected his own dejec-

tion. The bantam Mike Dell scowled and drank from a bottle he had brought out from town.

Mark Tooney grinned at Reck. His fine gray suit was smudged and torn. "I've got a hunch we'll do it," Tooney said. His hazel eyes were red-rimmed from working long hours in the blistering sun. Even though he was unused to physical labor he had not complained.

Just before sundown Reck left Dave Quimby and Channing to guard the mules and cars. Taking Hillard's crew and Mark Tooney, Reck headed for the Corstain hideout, not more than five miles east across the flats.

The moment they topped the rise above the sprawling Corstain headquarters Reck knew something was wrong. The corral gate was open and the enclosure empty of horses. He felt a cold wet spot on his back when he thought of Ivis down there. No telling what had happened. When he spurred his horse down the slant, with the others trailing behind, he saw that the sound of their approach had brought movement in the adobe. Only when he saw Ivis run into the yard to shield her eyes against the sun did he relax.

"Zoe's gone," Ivis said in a tight, strained voice when he swung down. "Last night when we'd gone to bed she sneaked out."

Staring at the empty corral, Reck said, "Looks like she turned the rest of the horses loose."

Upon hearing Reck's voice, old Sam Corstain came into the yard, feeling his way through the dust with his cane. "Damn my son for marrying a woman like Zoe!" he stormed. "Last night she pretended to be so damned sweet it would make you sick. She rolled my smokes for me and got me a drink. Then she watched her chance and sneaked out."

Caballo, shaking his gray head, muttered, "Now we have much trouble, no?"

Sandy Hillard swept them with a black look. "A woman ain't safe in the border country. We ought to go after her."

Sam Corstain gave a short laugh. "By this time she's reached Trancas."

Mark Tooney gave Reck a slow smile, then turned to Hillard. "You shouldn't be too concerned about a woman like her, Sandy. Zoe is more my type. She and I are both cut from the same cloth."

Not understanding the lawyer's words, Sandy Hillard took immediate offense. His nerves already tight from the exhausting hours they had spent getting the engine and cars ready to move out of the river jungle, the redhead loosed a curse and put a hand to his gun.

There was enough trouble in the Corstain ranks without fighting over Zoe, Reck knew. When Hillard made his move, Reck moved in quickly, clamping the redhead's arms to his sides so he could not complete his draw. Hillard swore and tried to jerk loose. As they wrestled across the porch, Reck spun into old Sam Corstain, who sat hunched in his cane-bottomed chair. The force of the impact knocked Sam Corstain to his knees.

In that moment when the blind man was touched, a furry shape leaped straight at Reck with bared fangs. From the corner of his eye Reck caught the movement, heard the dog's deep-throated growl. Spinning free of Hillard, Reck threw up an arm, knocking old Mike aside.

Before the dog could come at him again, Sam Corstain, sensing what was happening, yelled: "No, Mike! Down, Mike! Leave him alone!"

The old dog halted, panting. Then, as if the effort of that attempted attack had depleted his energy, the dog trotted off to a shady corner of the porch and plopped into the dust.

Sandy Hillard was glaring at Reck as Sam Corstain was helped back into his chair.

It was Ivis who said, "That was your own dog, Reck. It's odd that he'd jump you. Sam has been telling me the dog always worshipped you."

Seeing the puzzled look in her eyes, Reck said, "We've got Trancas to worry about. Zoe will tell him where we're hid out."

Still glowering, Hillard moved to the corral with Mike Dell. There they seemed to be in some sort of discussion.

Mark Tooney said, "Zoe's put her black curse on Sandy. I'll bet a double eagle against a plugged peso he's going after her." The lawyer turned to give Reck a level stare with his hazel eyes. "Hillard isn't very smart, falling in love with another man's wife."

Reck said, "When this is over, I'll let you in on a secret. If you haven't guessed it already."

"Maybe I have," the lawyer said, and turned to look across the dusty yard where Hillard and the bantam Mike Dell were walking toward their horses. "You going to let them go?"

"Why not?" Reck grunted. "Zoe's got Hillard the same as all tied up in one of those lace hankies of hers. He won't be any good to us anyhow."

For a moment Reck had an urge to run now while he had the chance. Take Ivis and go to Mexico City or Honduras. Have a life for himself instead of running the risk of ending this only life he'd ever have. But he was a stubborn man.

Jube Canavan also was a stubborn man. That morning he had been considering his black luck in the camp his outfit had made at the Alamo Hill. The rustler stirred his tall figure lazily. He lay by the dying embers of their cook fire, picking his teeth. He had six men left. He also was considering a life in Mexico, but his stubborness was too ingrained. He had come back here to settle up with the Corstains for putting him in Yuma Prison. His luck had been bad. He had paid Tay Gillis back for putting that thin white scar across his right cheek by lifting Gillis' scalp. But the irony of it was that he had had Reck Corstain in his rifle sights but couldn't down him. Those damned Corstains, Canavan thought, had more lives than a cat.

His crew was surly after a slim breakfast of beans and bacon. They had to be careful these days. Branler and the other valley ranchers had doubled the guard around their horse herds. Two of Canavan's men who had been looking over a herd of horses at Sandoval Canyon had

been hanged by some of Art Henshaw's Spur riders. Whenever Canavan thought of those swinging bodies, he shuddered.

Canavan looked at his hard-eyed men. They were disgruntled and he couldn't blame them. The easy pickings he had promised just weren't to be had. Lothar Trancas had offered him the moon with a silver ring around it, and the proposition had worked out; Canavan raiding stock and Trancas blaming it on the Corstains. But when the Corstain wings were clipped, Trancas didn't need Canavan any longer.

The sound of two horses moving toward the canyon brought Canavan to his feet, jerking his gun. Lou Talisman, his chunky segundo had gone to the river tulles to try and scare up some quail with his shotgun. Now he was riding back, a slim boy in tow. As the pair drew closer Canavan could see the stranger was no boy. Not with a front like that. It was a woman, by God.

Lou Talisman swung down, holding his shotgun on the black-haired woman. The woman wore a man's shirt and jeans rolled up. The shirt was unbuttoned halfway down.

Lou Talisman grunted, "Reck Corstain's wife."

Jube Canavan's eyes lighted and he rubbed his hands together. But the woman did not flinch. She just sat her saddle arrogantly, staring down at him out of those amber eyes as if he wasn't fit to spit on. He felt the hair raise at the nape of his neck.

Flexing his left arm, Talisman said, "Your husband put a bullet in my shoulder. I ought to make you pay for that."

Here was one way to get even with the Corstains, Canavan thought. Pay them back for those stinking years he spent in Yuma.

Brad Doner, a sawed-off rustler with a red beard, said in a voice that trembled slightly, "She's a Corstains, Jube. You sure as hell hate all the Corstains."

Hearing the idea from somebody else made it sound too raw even for Canavan. He glared at Zoe. "What you doin' out here?"

"Reck and Sam Corstain have been holding me prisoner," she said, leaning over the saddle horn. "They're holed up at an old abandoned ranch a dozen miles south of here."

"Must be the old Portero place," Jube Canavan said, an edge of excitement creeping into his voice.

Zoe's face tightened. "Kill them both for me. I don't care what happens to me, but kill them."

Brad Doner lifted a hand to the bridle of her horse, tilting up his red-bearded face, grinning. "We got plenty of time, Jube."

Jube Canavan said, "Get away from that horse, Doner." To Zoe, he said, "Get movin', Mrs. Corstain."

It was several hours later that Jube Canavan stuck a pair of cavalry field glasses back in their case and rubbed his hands expectantly. They had been on the rise of ground behind the adobe, watching the activity in the yard below. They had also been passing around a jug of sun-warmed whiskey. They were meaner than hell and itching to start shooting.

Jube Canavan said, "I'll take the runt," and as Mike Dell walked across the yard to get his horse, Canavan lifted his rifle.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

RECK WATCHED HILLARD and Mike Dell move to their horses, feeling a sudden dejection. At this juncture their help would be sorely missed. From the bedroom window he saw Dell suddenly stiffen, his arms flopping loosely. Instantly a rifle cracked from upslope. Dell's horse pitched, and the bantam rustler fell headfirst to the hard-packed yard. Even at that distance Reck could hear the snap of bone, and knew from the way Dell landed, with his head twisted queerly that his neck was broken.

Reck snatched up a rifle, fired at that puff of smoke where the rifleman lay hidden. Hillard was running for the house. Bullets cut the dust around him. He made the

house, panting. Mark Tooney slammed shut the heavy door, bolted it.

Now Reck saw a line of horsemen come sweeping down the slope firing at each jump of their mounts. Chipped adobe was flung into the faces of the defenders as bullets knocked out window glass, ricocheted off the walls.

"Must be Trancas!" Old San Corstain yelled, working a rifle at a window, firing at the sound of the horses.

"Trancas hell!" Sandy Hillard snarled. "It's that damned horsethief, Jube Canavan!"

Sam Corstain laughed shrilly. "Come to lift the scalp of a Corstain!"

Reck had pulled Ivis to the floor at his side. She huddled there against him as he worked the rifle on those oncoming riders. Either drunk or crazy, they were, Reck thought, to ride in openly like this.

Old Mike, excited by the firing and the rush of horses into the yard, lunged at a foreleg. One of Canavan's men fired and the old dog yelped and went down under the plunging hoofs. Reck caught one of the rustlers squarely in the chest—a red-bearded man who was in the saddle one moment, the next sprawled across the body of the dog he had just killed.

As the rustlers swept past the house, Jube Canavan's taunting voice was a harsh sound above the din of exploding guns: "You'll hang tonight, Corstains!"

Caballo, standing by a window, was trying to line his rifle on Canavan. A bullet struck the big iron stove in one corner of the room, ricocheted. A bubbling red spot appeared suddenly behind Caballo's right ear. The big, horse-faced Mexican dropping heavily to the dirt floor. Reck felt Ivis shudder beside him. Her lips were pale but there was no fear in her blue eyes.

The riders had swept downslope out of rifle range to regroup for another charge. Reck saw two bodies in the yard. In that first charge he had counted seven men. That meant there were five left in Canavan's crew. Five against four men and a woman.

Canavan's voice drifted to them. "Reck Corstain! It

was your own wife that told us where you was hid out!" Canavan laughed shrilly.

Shadows had begun to lengthen across the room. Reck caught sight of Sandy Hillard's tight face. Hillard said, "If Canavan hurt Zoe I'll cut out his heart."

Mark Tooney was grinning slightly. "For a man who's lived by his gun instead of his head, you're a romantic fool, Hillard." When the redhead glared at him, Tooney shrugged and said, "So am I."

Sam Corstain said, "To hell with Zoe. It's us we got to worry about. If I know Canavan he'll wait till full dark, then burn us out."

"We're not waiting till full dark," Reck said, and picking up a loaded rifle, stepped for the door. "Want to try it with me, Sandy?"

Hillard stared at him sullenly for a moment, then shrugging, said, "What the hell."

"Take me along," Tooney said, but Reck shook his head.

Without glancing back at Ivis, Reck slipped outside by the kitchen door. Canavan and his men were downslope. He could hear them talking and from the thick sound of their voices he knew they were drinking. They were arguing how best the final attack could be made. Some wanted to get it over with now. Canavan said they ought to wait.

Keeping the house between themselves and the rustlers grouped at the south end of the yard, Reck and Hillard gained the shelter of a shed wall. Canavan had evidently lost the argument, for Reck could hear the creak of saddle leather as men dismounted. This time they'd try it afoot, hoping the thickening twilight and a ledge of rocks, halfway up the slope would serve as cover.

"Easy, boys," Canavan said. "There's a redheaded woman in that house. We want her alive."

Now Reck could see their flitting shadows as they moved upslope to surround the house.

"Ain't been a sound in that house," Canavan complained. "Maybe we killed 'em all."

Hillard had been staring into the shadows, now he said, "There's Canavan and next to him is Moe Talisman."

Reck followed his pointing finger, seeing the tall, stooped rustler and his stocky second in command.

"To hell with the rest of them," Reck whispered. "Let's get these two."

Not expecting anyone to come at them from behind the shed, Canavan and his crew were hunched down, studying the house from the line of boulders when Reck and Hillard approached. It was Moe Talisman who caught a movement from the corner of his eye. The chunky man suddenly whipped over on his back, yelling: "Corstain!"

At the same instant he fired, but it was Hillard's shot that was swifter. It knocked Talisman spinning so that he fell limply across a boulder, his arms dangling. Canavan and the other three rustlers were on their feet, yelling in surprise.

As if at a signal, guns opened up from the house. Reck smiled grimly as he counted those shots, knowing Ivis had joined Tooney and Sam Corstain.

He had pulled Hillard down behind the rocks to keep from getting cut to pieces by their own forces. Now he saw Jube Canavan swing up his rifle, yelling, "Goddam you, Reck!"

He was shooting as fast as he could trigger the rifle, but Reck had dropped his long gun and pulled his .45. Canavan was shooting into the ground, leaning far over as if the weight of his body had suddenly shifted above his shoulders.

"You wanted to kill a Corstain," Reck said as the rustler pitched to the ground, "but you never made it."

A bullet from the house had cut down one of the remaining members of Canavan's startled crew. The other two suddenly lifted their hands. Full of whiskey and surprised to find Reck and Hillard behind them, the men had not been able to clearly evaluate their position until too late.

Reck, standing above the bodies of Canavan and Talis-

man, said, "You can finish it now, boys, or you can ride."

Hillard was yelling at the house for them to hold their fire. And hardly had the sound of his voice died than the two men left out of the seven who had come to fulfill Canavan's vow of vengeance, got their horses and rode south without their guns.

When it was over, Ivis flung herself into Reck's arms. He could feel her tremble against him, feel the wetness of her tears against his face. "I'm so glad it's finished—done," she cried.

He pushed her away, saying grimly, "It's just started."

Excitement mounted as news that the Corstains were bringing a train to Apache from the Mexican jungle swept the countryside. Men who before had considered their Great Southwestern stock only so much paper, now began to see a faint hope. It took two weeks of agonizing toil under a broiling sun to work the wood-burner and the two cars within gunshot distance of Apache. Ivis, her clothes stained, her face smudged, did the cooking. All the ranchers of the valley had loaned their punchers to Reck. And although they still held a suspicion of the Corstain motives, they did their chores silently.

It was discouraging, back-breaking effort, moving ahead a few feet, taking the rollers that had allowed the engine and cars to move on the wooden runners, then laying the rollers in front again for another half dozen feet of progress. Cables groaned under the weight, mules dug their hoofs stubbornly into the heavy sand, inching along the heavy cargo.

Even though Reck constantly kept a gun guard alerted, Trancas made no move against him. It puzzled and at the same time worried him. Trancas wasn't going to be whipped this easily.

Working without sleep, his nerves pulled tight as new fence wire, Reck did not allow himself to dwell too much on the showdown with Trancas that he knew must come. So far he had been lucky. That brush with Jube Canavan

could very easily have been the end. And how many men were hanged and then lived to talk about it?

In town Lorenzo, the blacksmith, was turning out spikes for rails. Ties were hastily cut. A crew was laying rails at the edge of town, two hundred feet of the worst roadbed probably ever put down in the West. But if it would carry the Corstain train, nothing else mattered.

When they had worked the train within rifle shot of town, Joe Branler shook his brown-beard at Reck. "I still don't figure how you'll beat the CSL this way. The deadline expires tonight at midnight and you still haven't connected with the Nevada Central."

Reck gave him a tired smile. "I hope we're right."

"So do I," Branler grunted and turned at the shout from Mark Tooney that the engine had slipped off the rollers and bogged down in the sand.

Dave Bulwar plunged his beefy arms into the tank, washing out glasses behind his cherrywood bar. Business was good. Men lined the bar, filled the tables. Feeling ran higher and bets were made openly that the Corstains might at last bring a railroad to Apache. Tension was mounting by the hour and Bulwar, to take care of the overflow business, had to put on two more bartenders. Men who had not been in town for months were drifting in from the far edge of the valley.

At the bar Lothar Trancas stood erect in his black suit, his dark head at an arrogant tilt. He sipped a shotglass of whiskey. At his side stood the fat Bernard Hemphill of the CSL. Hemphill looked worried. A faint line of perspiration showed through the sparse hair of his brows.

A clatter rose in the street, dust clouded against the saloon windows. Hemphill said morosely, "The stage just came in."

"He ought to be on this one," Trancas said, and finished his drink.

When Trancas started for the door, Hemphill laid a plump hand on his arm. "I'll stay behind. It might not look too good if I'm seen with a—hired killer."

Trancas' lips curved thinly beneath his black mustache. "Losing your nerve?" he prodded.

Hemphill shook his head. "Just see that Reck Corstain dies."

Trancas nodded. "Pete DeSand is good. His fee is high, but he's worth it."

Hemphill frowned. "You plan to have the showdown in town?"

"Where everybody can see it."

"People might say you've gone yellow, bringing in DeSand like this instead of facing Corstain yourself," Hemphill muttered.

Trancas' lips flattened over his teeth. "I'll take care of Reck Corstain myself. DeSand is around to keep Corstain's friends off my back."

They moved to the door from the far end of the bar where they had been standing alone. Bulwar watched them step through the swing doors together. Suddenly the saloonman removed his apron, put on his hat and stepped out the alley door.

On the walk in front of Bulwar's, Trancas looked toward the stage station where a tall dusty figure was alighting from the stage. The man came toward them, carrying a canvas bag. Trancas studied the man. He remembered the argument he and Zoe had had about sending for DeSand. Zoe had arrived in town dusty and tired with a story of being held prisoner by the Corstains and then being briefly detained by Jube Canavan. She wanted him to take his crew and smash the Corstains. But Trancas had hoped Canavan had taken care of that. But such was not the case.

Yesterday from a hilltop Trancas had seen Reck directing the movement of the engine and cars through the sand. Trancas wished Gillis were alive. He was a man you could depend on. The rest of his Broken Wheel riders would likely desert if the going got too rough. It was luck learning that DeSand was in a nearby town. Trancas laughed silently. Let Reck Corstain drag his damned train

into town and sweat his guts out doing it. He'd die for his trouble.

Leaving Hemphill in front of Bulwar's, Trancas walked to meet the approaching stranger. DeSand was rather nondescript, a lathy man with a stubble of beard on his cheeks. He wore a collarless shirt, the band held by a brass stud. The only efficient thing about him was the gun at his belt. He had the coldest blue eyes Trancas had ever seen.

"You Trancas?" DeSand said.

"Yeah."

"I got your message. Who's this johnny you want dead?"

Trancas drew him into an alleyway. "His name is Reck Corstain."

DeSand smiled coldly. "Just point him out." He held out a smooth, white hand. "It'll be payment—in advance."

Reck and his crew had just dug the engine out of the sand where it had bogged down and got it back on the rollers when Dave Bulwar rode into camp. The saloonman crossed his beefy arms over the saddlehorn. When Bulwar beckoned to him, Reck stepped away from the others and walked over where Bulwar sat his horse at the edge of the camp.

"I never was on your side, Reck," Bulwar said, "but lots of folks in this valley got money in that railroad. If you can beat the CSL, I'm for you."

Sam Corstain, drawn by the sound of voices had felt his way across the sand with his cane. "Speak your piece, Bulwar," he growled, recognizing the saloonman's voice.

Bulwar said, "I just got this to say, Reck. Trancas has hired Pete DeSand."

So weary from the long ordeal he could hardly stand, Reck took this news with compressed lips. "Pete DeSand," he muttered. "Seems like I've heard of him."

Sam Corstain blurted, "A snake. A hired gun." He laughed dryly. "Must be Trancas is afraid of you, Reck."

Bulwar had turned his horse back toward Apache. Reck

wiped a sleeve across his sweating forehead. He lifted his gun, checked the loads and shoved the weapon back into the holster.

"There's only one way to settle this," he said, and strode for his horse. "Don't let anybody follow me," he said over his shoulder. "Keep this train moving. We haven't got much time."

Even when he was spurring across the clearing, he heard Ivis crying out for him to come back. But he did not turn his head. He had steeled himself to the business at hand. If he stopped to reconsider his resolve would melt. A woman's eyes could do that to a man, turn him soft inside as it had once done Reck Corstain.

He circled the town, coming in from the north, keeping to the alleyways. When he passed Doc Shanley's house, standing empty and forlorn, he thought of the little doctor. This town owed Doc Shanley a lot. Someday, if he lived, Reck would make them erect a monument in his honor.

In back of Bulwar's Saloon, he tied his horse. He needed a drink. His muscles ached and he was tired enough to crawl into the shade of a rainbarrel and sleep. He was peering in the back windows of the saloon, scanning the crowd for Trancas when Bulwar spotted him. The saloonman stepped to the rear door. "Bert Hascomb's in the alley, keeping watch for you." Bulwar shut the door and Reck watched him through the window, stride back to the bar. The saloonman had offered a thin edge of help, but even though he had half-heartedly supported the Corstains in this business with Trancas and DeSand, he would not openly make a stand. Bulwar was a business man after all, Reck reflected. If the CSL crowd had their way, Bulwar wanted to get their patronage instead of being run out of town. Bulwar, after all, had a wife and kids. A man's first obligation was to his family.

Reck gave a short laugh. *A man's family,* he thought bitterly. *The Corstains.*

Again came that urge to get out of town and let Trancas have his triumph. But he had stepped to the alley

beside the saloon. He saw Bert Hascomb's broad back. The Broken Wheel foreman who had taken Gillis' place, was leaning against the saloon wall, watching the street. Reck moved up behind him, putting a gun against his back.

"It's me—Reck. Where's Trancas?"

Hascomb stiffened, moving away from the wall. He glanced back over his shoulder, worry and fear putting a shine in his gray eyes. "We didn't figure you'd be in till later."

"What were you doing here? Counting flies?"

A constant stream of traffic flowed past the alley mouth, cowmen in high-heeled boots, men in well-cut suits and brocaded vests, drawn by the lure of money a railroad would bring. A girl with a painted mouth saw them in the alley and smiled and inclined her head in an age-old invitation. Before Hascomb could answer, Reck said, "Later, honey. Later." The girl shrugged and turned back into the crowd.

He took Hascomb by the belt, drew him back down the alley. At the rear of the saloon, he turned the big foreman around. "Where's Trancas? I'm short of breath, and I won't ask again."

The big foreman who had argued with Trancas against killing Hillard's man, Charlie Miller, spread his hands out, palms up. "Count me out of it, Corstain. Take my gun and let me go. I don't want no part of this."

Reck thumbed back the hammer of his gun, the oiled mechanism producing a metallic sound in the alley. "I want Trancas."

Bert Hascomb wet his lips. His eyes had a strange shine. "They're playin' poker." His eyes lifted. "Upstairs."

In that moment, Hascomb took a backward step, his big face going slack, for above had sounded the tinkle of broken window glass. Reck spun, striking Hascomb across the forehead with his gun barrel. As the foreman dropped into a litter of tin cans, Reck was facing around. In one of the side windows of the hall where he had taken Zoe to the dance, he saw a thin figure. A man with a

stubble of beard on his cheeks. A man wearing a shirt with no collar. The brass stud at his neck looked big as a headlight. The man had not bothered to open the window. He had broken out a chunk with his gun barrel. Grinning slightly, he was sighting down the barrel.

Desperately Reck dove sideways, hearing the roar of DeSand's gun, hearing the metallic sound as the bullet tore into a tin gutter. As he was moving, Reck fired three times as fast as he could lift the hammer and drop it. He saw the window explode in DeSand's thin face. DeSand flung arms across his face as if to shield his eyes from the flying glass. Then he clutched a widening wet spot just above his belt line. He teetered there a moment, staring down into the alley at the tall yellow-haired man. Then he fell forward. His progress, momentarily halted by the jagged window glass, ripped a harsh scream from his lips. Then he toppled outward, turning once in mid-air. He lit heavily in the alley, his thin body raising a small puff of dust.

At the end of the alley, faces were bunched like cattle in a chute. Then as Reck turned that way with his gun held rigid in his hand, the faces melted away. Men broke for the street in a frantic scramble for safety.

Upstairs Reck could hear a man's heavy tread. He heard a chair overturned. The steps were going toward the front part of the building. He moved that way, stepping over DeSand's body. At the alley mouth he saw frightened women in gingham dresses and wearing sunbonnets, herding their small children along the walk. Women who had come to town with their men folks.

At the far end of the street he saw brown-bearded Joe Branler and half a dozen of his men. At his side rode Mark Tooney. The lawyer's hat was gone, his face gray with fatigue. He carried a rifle.

"Keep out of it!" Reck shouted at them.

For a moment the men were silent, then Branler said, "We'll keep the Broken Wheel off your neck."

Reck heard the door open that led to the hall above. He knew Trancas was standing in the entrance even

though he couldn't see him. He could tell by the way eyes were suddenly riveted on that spot, by the way men stood on the far walk as if transfixed. Even the women seemed held by some invisible force.

"There's women and kids here, Trancas," Reck called. "Somebody's going to get hurt."

"What about it?" Trancas drawled from the doorway.

"Go through Bulwar's Saloon to the alley door. When you get there start shooting 'cause I'll be waiting!"

For a moment Trancas seemed to consider this. Then he said, "It'll take me longer than it will you. Give me time."

"I'll start walking, slowly. You do the same."

Reck turned down the alley, his stomach tight. Killing always sickened him. A green fly darted skyward from Pete DeSand's body when Reck approached. At the far end of the alley Bert Hascomb still lay as if stone dead. A trickle of blood worked down one side of the foreman's face from the blow of Reck's gun barrel.

As he moved, Reck kept his ears cocked for the sound of Trancas' footsteps in the saloon next door, for it was so still he could hear the slow hammerbeat of his own heart. But inside the saloon there was no sound.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A SHADOW moving swiftly across the dusty ground behind the saloon warned Reck. It was the only warning he had that Trancas had kicked off his boots and run the length of the saloon in his sock feet. Silently he had run and silently he was rushing around a corner of the saloon. Dust spurted up around his heavy wool socks spattering his black-foxed pants. His dark face wore a grin and there was the devil in his eyes.

"You should've stayed dead when you had the chance!" he yelled, and fired.

Reck was standing with his feet planted solidly in the alley dust. Trancas was moving and it was enough to send that first shot into the mercantile wall next door.

With no pity, no remorse for this killing, Reck shot him before Trancas could get set again. The man stumbled, clutched his chest with his left hand. He bent over, trying to fire, but his reflexes triggered the gun into the dust. He fell face down, his long dark-clad body gray with dirt, stained by horse droppings. He lifted his head once to glare, his eyes a red-mud color. Then he stiffened.

From the crowd that charged into the alley, Joe Branler said, "We ought to charge five dollars a head just to look at Trancas. He's cost this county enough."

Shaken, Reck holstered his gun. He shouldered his way through the crowd. He found a cool hand on his arm. It was Ivis and she was ripping aside his shirt. Blood flowed from a cut in his forearm. So tight he had been in those brief moments he had not felt the sting of the bullet. He never did know which one had shot him, Trancas or DeSand.

Then, still dazed, he turned back into the alley, bent over Trancas' body and removed a pair of solid silver spurs. "Reck Corstain's spurs," he said, holding them up for the crowd to see. "I wonder if he's man enough to claim 'em."

They stared at him in silence as the tall girl with the coppery hair led him to the street where Mark Tooney was waiting.

The girl was looking at Reck. "You don't belong here. Somehow I sense it. I don't care what your past has been. But let's leave this place. Now."

Mark Tooney gave her a tight grin. "Reck's got a deal with me. He can't run out. Not when the money's just starting to come our way."

Reck saw old Sam Corstain at Tooney's side. For a long moment he stared at this old man who had felt his way through the crowd with the gnarled cane he gripped in a veined hand.

"How about you, Sam?" he asked. "Do you want me to stay and finish this?"

Sam Corstain nodded his gray head. "You can tell 'em the truth later. I reckon you'll have to on account of Zoe."

Zoe Corstain, drawn by the shooting, had come to the alley mouth, shocked at the sight of Trancas and the man he had hired to do his killing crumpled in death. But she bristled instantly, reading some hidden meaning into Sam Corstain's words.

"You'll not get rid of me!" she cried to Reck. "I'll never let you divorce me! Never!" She glared at Ivis Drake and whirled back into the crowd.

Reck stared after her a moment, then said, "Take Ivis to the house, Sam. It's the safest place till this is over."

"Zoe won't like it," Sam Corstain said dryly.

"It's your house, after all," Reck reminded him.

With Trancas dead, Bert Hascomb was eager to talk, revealing how Trancas and Tay Gillis had robbed the stage office strong box of the forty thousand dollars—money paid by valley ranchers and townspeople for Great Southwestern Rail Road stock. The money, Hascomb said, was hidden at the Broken Wheel.

After Hascomb told his story, Reck wearily stepped out of the sheriff's office to find Bernard Hemphill waiting for him. The CSL man grinned weakly. "It's you I should have dealt with, Corstain. Not Trancas. It's not too late to come in with us. My company will pay good money for a man like you."

"Go to hell," Reck told the fat man.

Hemphill shook his fist. "You still haven't got a railroad," he reminded.

"I'll have one," Reck said, and turned to his horse, riding to where the crew was still sweating with mules and cable with a train he hoped would soon make history in Apache.

A late afternoon sun glinted dully on the two-hundred feet of track that led to the center of Apache, a roadbed laid by men more familiar with rope and branding iron than with spikes and a sledge hammer. When they finally jacked the engine and the two cars onto the rails, Reck nudged Joe Branler, nodding his head at Bernard Hemp-

hill who stood at the edge of the swirling crowd that had come to see the first train enter Apache.

"He knows we've got him licked," Reck told the brown-bearded JB owner.

In the meantime Dave Quimby was in the engine cab, trying to recall the necessary steps needed to fire the boilers. "There's probably a lot I've forgot," he said, his Adam's apple bobbing in his thin neck. "I only hope she don't blow up."

It had been a long time since Quimby had fired on the railroad back in Ohio. Under his direction they filled the water tank, stocked the firebox with cordwood and primed it with kerosene.

It was an awesome moment when Quimby said, "Here goes," and tossed a lighted match into the firebox.

Reck, Tooney and Quimby watched the needle climb on the steam gague.

From the cab window Reck saw a horseman beyond the crowd, moving back toward town. It was Sandy Hillard, heading for Jefferson Street and the Corstain house. *He's gone for Zoe,* Reck thought. *The poor damned fool.*

Quimby wiped sweating hands on his levis and reached for the Johnson Bar. It refused to move. Tooney added his weight to the bar, but it seemed impossible to dislodge it.

"Rusted stuck," Quimby said dismally.

A few moments later the sharp crack of a gun drifted from the general direction of Jefferson Street. A few heads in the crowd turned, but a gunshot was of minor importance on this momentous day.

Bernard Hemphill, seeing Quimby and Mark Tooney trying to move the Johnson Bar, cried: "You haven't won yet, Corstain!"

Mark Tooney, his face smudged with dirt, said, "He's right, Reck. If we can't get this train to move, we're out of business."

But Reck was not listening. A nameless dread had built in him slowly to spread through every fibre of his body.

That gunshot. What did it mean? He shouldered his way through the crowd that had come to see him beat the CSL at their own game. Word had gone out that Reck had a hole card calculated to whip the CSL. What it was nobody knew. For the first time in years men looked on a Corstain with favor. As he moved to his horse, men called his name.

If the Great Southwestern Rail Road became a reality it would mean a change for Apache that would benefit all its citizens. It would be *their* railroad, for hardly a man in the valley did not own at least one share of stock. On the other hand, if the CSL won, their exorbitant freight rates would dictate the economy of the whole valley.

Reck's stomach felt weighted when he pulled up in front of the Corstain mansion, a lead-weighted heaviness that brought with it a touch of nausea. Perhaps it was fear. Then there was no uncertainty as to this new emotion—he was yellow-dog scared. Conscious of a slight trembling in his thighs, he stepped around Sandy Hillard's horse, moving along the walk to the big and silent house. Some premonition of disaster had touched him back there in the engine cab when the sharp sound of that lone shot had reached his ears. It was too much to ask, he told himself, for a man to go through this again. First it had been Jube Canavan, then Trancas and Pete DeSand. Would his luck hold? All he could think of on that long walk up to the porch was Ivis Drake; he remembered her smile, the deep blue of her eyes.

By the time he reached the open front door, he was ice again. For a long moment he waited on the porch, sensing that someone inside waited for him with a gun. What if Zoe in some wild impulse for revenge had turned on Ivis and the old man? But he pushed the thought from his mind. No, that wasn't the way it was at all.

He stepped into the big, shadowy parlor where his coffin had rested so long ago. "Ivis," he called softly, his voice a whisper of sound in the big house.

Only silence. Far off he could hear the faint rumble of

the crowd that had gathered to watch the success or failure of the Great Southwestern.

He stood with his shoulder blades pressed against the wall, cocked gun rigid in his hand. A drop of sweat broke from under his hat brim, rolled across his forehead. Impatiently he brushed it away. Drapes had been pulled over the windows. In the thick gloom he was unsure of himself. He moved toward a hallway that led to the sitting room. Now that his eyes had accustomed themselves to the change of light, he saw a pair of booted feet projecting from an angle in the hall. Reck tensed, seeing the feet belonged to Sandy Hillard. Hillard's gun was still in his holster. He lay on his side. The bullet had struck him in the side of the head. Shot down without warning. Under Hillard, the carpet showed a large brown stain.

Quickly he moved to the open door of the sitting room. Instantly he got the picture: Ivis sitting tense in a chair at the far end of the room, hands clenched in her lap. Her eyes, he noted in this moment, had never seemed so startling blue nor so frightened.

There was a silent pleading in her eyes it took him a moment to understand. He turned his head, seeing Zoe standing rigid, staring at Hillard's body on the hall floor. He saw the shock in her amber eyes, the trembling of her lips. Old Sam Corstain, sitting on a sofa, held his big cane between his knees.

Through stiffened lips Ivis said, "Reck, you'll have to put down your gun or he'll kill you."

Instantly Reck was conscious of a cold wet spot between his shoulder blades. He caught his breath. A man's body made a bulge behind one of the long plush drapes that covered the side windows. As he moved slowly to one side, Reck could see a cocked revolver pressed against the back of Ivis Drake's head.

Carefully Reck let down the hammer of his gun, let the weapon drop onto the thick carpeting.

Old Sam Corstain's voice was hoarse when he said, "He came back. I hoped he was dead. But—"

Suddenly the plush drape was jerked aside. A tall man stood there, grinning. A man of the same build as Reck. In the gloom of the big parlor a stranger might have taken them for twins. The stranger's features were regular, however, unmarred. A contrast to the scars Reck bore and his broken nose. On Reck's face there was strength. On the stranger's, weakness.

The shock had evidently begun to wear off Zoe, for she began to whimper softly.

The stranger said, an insolent whine in his voice, "News travels fast. I was a long ways down in Mexico because I figured the Corstains were through here." He laughed, his eyes cold against the man who stood in the doorway. "But I heard you were going to put the Corstains back on the map. I decided you'd earned your money and it was about time to settle up and take my rightful place."

Reck swallowed in a dry throat. Although he now remembered everything he stalled. Every second that passed was another second of life that might provide an opportunity to outwit this madman with the cocked revolver, hopeless as it might seem. Reck said, "How did I happen to get roped into this," and took a sliding step away from the doorway.

The stranger still grinned. "I heard about you losing your memory." He pushed the muzzle of his gun harder against Ivis Drake's skull. Reck saw the girl shudder. The stranger went on talking, enjoying this. "You had just come down from Virginia City, remember? I met you in San Diego. We looked enough alike to be out of the same mold." The man chuckled. "Trancas had told me that if I ever come back to Apache he'd kill me. I wanted to see if he was bluffing. I made a big joke about you and me looking so much alike. I told you I wanted to fool some people. I rode with you to the edge of town. You went on alone. Trancas jumped you outside in the yard. I watched them work you over then hang you to the shed wall. It was too bad for me that you insisted on gettin' paid in advance. I gave you them silver coffin handles I won off a Mex in Hermosillo."

Old Sam Corstain said, "And like the coward you are, you ran off and left your father and your wife!"

The stranger's eyes hardened. "I'm back now to take over. That's what counts."

Reck said, edging forward, "Are you going to murder us like you did Sandy Hillard?"

"Maybe. Hillard wanted Zoe to run off with him." He glared at the rigid Zoe. "That's a hell of a homecoming for a husband."

Reck forced a taunting grin on his lips. "You've got a good-looking wife. I sure enjoyed stepping into your boots —in more ways than one."

The stranger jerked his gun up. Reck held his breath. That was what he had been hoping for: to get that muzzle away from Ivis.

The man said, "I've been a damned fool about Zoe. Even when I knew she and Trancas were—" His grip on the gun butt tightened. "But Zoe's mine." He inclined his head, as if to get a closer look at this tall, yellow-haired man. "I hear you killed Trancas. And now with you dead, there'll be nobody for Zoe but me."

"There'll always be somebody," Reck said softly. "Zoe is that kind of a woman."

The man's lips curled back from his teeth. "All right, Jim Bryan!" he shouted. "Turn around! I don't like to look at a man when I kill him!"

Reck, that grin still iced to his lips, moved forward another step, ignoring the command. "A teamster called me Jim Bryan in Carson City. My memory was sure a blank then because I figured he was just a drunk who took me for somebody else. But he must have known me at one time or another." Reck forced a laugh. "I didn't even know my own name. That's sure a crazy one, isn't it?"

"You're smart," the man admitted grudgingly. "Damned smart to beat the CSL. I'll say that for you."

"They're not licked yet," Reck said, keeping his eyes tight against that face that looked so much like his own. "It's not over yet. If my plan fails a lot of people around

here may start talking about hanging Reck Corstain again."

The stranger's eyes regarded him coolly. "Nothing can go wrong. Can it?"

"There was a loophole in the contract you signed with the Nevada Central. Your right-of-way expires tonight at midnight."

"What about it?"

"Instead of the contract reading that you had to have track laid to connect with the Nevada Central, it simply said that a train had to arrive in Apache under its own power by midnight tonight."

"The train's ready to roll. What can go wrong?"

Suddenly in the distance a train whistle blasted the air. In this big and silent room Reck heard faint shouts, gunshots, the sounds of a jubilant crowd. To him that sound meant one thing—the train had negotiated the two hundred feet of track under its own power. The contract had been fulfilled.

The stranger said, "I told you once to turn around."

Ivis Drake suddenly sobbed, "Don't kill him. We'll leave here."

"And have two Reck Corstains walkin' around—"

In that moment Sam Corstain suddenly hurled his cane at the man behind the sofa, gauging his aim from the sounds of this intruder's voice. At the same instant Sam Corstain yelled: "Get him, Reck!"

Reck Corstain, alias Jim Bryan, hurled himself against Ivis, sending her off the chair in a swirl of frothy petticoats. As he was twisting aside he heard the solid roar of a gun, felt a numbing shock. Desperately he lunged for the gun he had dropped on the floor. His whole left side was numb. He could hear Zoe screaming, hear Sam Corstain's curse.

Then his fingers touched the cold metal and he was twisting over on his back. He saw the man behind the sofa holding his left shoulder where Sam Corstain's heavy cane had caught him. The man was lifting his gun, his

teeth glistening white in faint sunlight that edged through the drapes.

Reck felt the floor jar beneath him as the weapon in the hands of this mad stranger roared its lethal sound. In that moment before spreading paralysis gripped him, Reck snapped up his gun. Lying with his shoulders tight against the wall, he fanned the hammer, using his last reserve in the effort. Just as he slumped over on his side he saw the bleeding prodigal who had come home to claim his heritage. The man staggered from behind the sofa, clutching his midriff. As he moved the life ran out of him, wet and red. With his eyes betraying the awful certainty of approaching death, he cried one word: "Zoe!" Then he crumpled to the floor.

Doctor Vincent Adams, who had come to Apache since the death of Doc Shanley, worked efficiently over his newest patient. A young man, he was interested in saving lives, not in the politics of this frontier town. He knew little of the turbulent past of the Corstains, cared less. When he finished his operation, it was his pronouncement that with luck the patient would live.

Doctor Adams left the room, giving the tall copper-haired girl a warm smile.

Ivis dropped to her knees beside the bed, fumbling for the patient's hand. "Oh, Reck," she sobbed. "It was so very, very close—"

"It's Reck no longer," he said, lifting his hand so he could touch her hair.

It was Sam Corstain, standing with bowed head beside the bed who said, "Reck Corstain is your name. If you'll take it. When I threw my cane and said 'get him, Reck,' I meant you. I wanted you to kill him." The old man gripped his cane tighter. "He wasn't fit to live. I've known it for a long time. Mike Tooney and Branler took him out of town and buried him. Everybody else thinks it was Sandy Hillard that shot you."

Reck stared up at the scarred face. "You're blind yet I figure you're the only one who guessed I really wasn't

Reck Corstain." He waited a moment, then added, "It was the dog that did it."

"Old Mike helped," Sam Corstain said. "A dog oughta know his own master. But it was a lot of other little things, too. Most folks wanted to believe you was Reck Corstain and folks believe what they want to."

"For a long time I thought my name was Corstain," Reck said quietly, and stirred on the bed. "But I can't take another man's name and live his life."

"Whatever folks thought about the Corstains in the past is changed now," Sam Corstain said. "This valley will make a lot of folks rich, thanks to you. And it would make things a heap simpler if you'd just keep on lettin' 'em think you're a Corstain."

Ivis said quickly, "What's in a name, Reck? Did Jim Bryan stand for anything special?"

He laughed bitterly. "It stood for a lot of smoky trails and things better forgotten."

Sam Corstain nodded. "I figured as much."

Then Reck's mouth tightened. "But you're not going to forget that I killed your son."

"To me he was dead for a long time. He was a renegade." The old man lifted his head. "You're my son, if you'll have it that way. I've done a lot of things in my life I ain't proud of. But maybe with you carrying the Corstain name, we can make up for some of 'em—Reck."

Reck shook his head. "It won't work, me taking the Corstain name. There's Zoe. I've got other ideas about a wife." He looked at Ivis.

Sam Corstain laughed shortly. "I paid Mark Tooney off in railroad stock. He said that bein' a lawyer around you was too damned dangerous. He went back to Virginia City."

Ivis said quietly, "Zoe went with him."

Reck swore softly. "Some men are short on brains when it comes to women."

"How about you?" Ivis asked.

For an answer Reck put a hand to the back of her head, drew her close.

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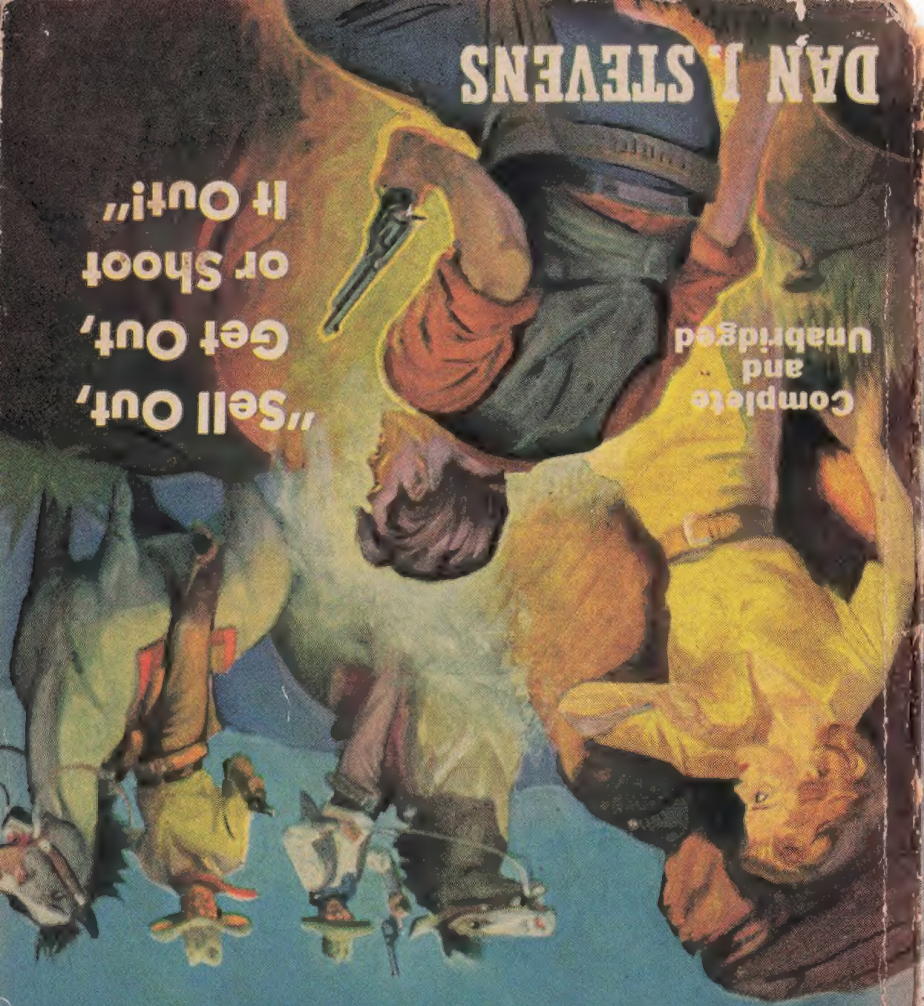

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